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RAYBOLD, THE RATTLING RANGER; Or, OLD ROCKY'S TOUGH CAMPAIGN.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,
AUTHOR OF "DIAMOND DICK," "THE TERRIBLE TONKAWAY," "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BIG FOOT WALLACE," ETC.



THEN WITH KNIFE IN ONE HAND AND THE GORY SCALP OF HIS HATED FOE IN THE OTHER, THE TONKAWAY CHIEF STOOD PROUDLY, HIS EAGLE-FEATHERS FLAUNTING, WHILE FROM HIS LIPS SHOT THE WAR CRY OF HIS TRIBE, IN VICTORIOUS EXULTATION.

Raybold,

THE RATTLING RANGER;

OR,

Old Rocky's Tough Campaign.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(Major Sam S. Hall.)

AUTHOR OF "KIT CARSON, JR.," "BOWLING
BILL," "STAMPEDE STEVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

PEARL OF THE PRAIRIE.

"Do not have any anxiety on my account, papa, nor you either, Old Rocky; for I shall not ride beyond view of the wagons, unless it be to enter a bend of the river yonder, in search of a nice cosey place where we may encamp to-night."

She was a beautiful maiden, who thus spoke, smiling back at her auditors as she touched her horse lightly with her riding-whip, causing the animal to bound over the prairie, with evident relief and pleasure at being allowed free rein and pace.

The two horsemen seemed much concerned at the words of the maiden and her abrupt departure, for each called aloud to her in remonstrance; but she noticed them not. One of the men was, as she had intimated, the young girl's father. His name was Prentiss Pemberton, commonly known as Colonel Pemberton. The other was "Old Rocky," a noted ranger and scout.

Both were men of about fifty years of age; the scout, from the life he had led, having the appearance of being much older than he really was.

In the rear of the two horsemen was a line of wagons, drawn by mules, six to each vehicle. These were freighted with the household goods of the colonel, and other effects, and he was now in search of a favorable point on the San Saba, where he proposed locating a ranch.

A small herd of cattle and horses were being driven in the rear of the wagons by two Texans, also white men; it being evident, from their attire and general appearance, that they were accustomed to roughing it on the border. Each wagon was covered by a canvas tilt, to protect the freight from rain and sun. The mules seemed weary, and showed marks of having been some time on the trail, as also did the wagons and harness, the last being patched and mended, while several of the wagons had rudely made tongues, cut from saplings, to replace the ones that had been broken off while crossing streams, or in surmounting the steep and difficult banks of the same.

Back between the train and the herd was a Dearborn wagon, drawn by two mules, that now jogged along listlessly, the reins being tied around an iron brace, while lying upon the driver's seat, and fast asleep, was a handsome youth of some fifteen years.

A mattress, blankets, shawls and various feminine belongings were in the Dearborn, indicating that the maiden, whose words commence this chapter, occupied this conveyance at night, and when wearying of riding upon her horse during the day.

This outfit was the train of Colonel Pemberton, who like many other rancheros east of San Antonio, disposed of their homes, in order that they might seek the free ranges to the west and northwest of the Alamo City, just previous to the civil war. At that time the Upper Colorado and its tributaries were considered, and with good reason, the most favorable grazing grounds on the American Continent, and although war-parties of Indians were liable to swoop down at any time, yet this fact did not prevent the adventurous Texans from locating at the more favorable places for stock-raising—many hundreds advancing upon the exposed border with their dear ones and all their worldly possessions each year. And notwithstanding the frequent massacres of these adventurous men and their families, in their new homes, or when *en route*, yet their places were filled, the emigration increasing, in place of being diminished.

Pearl Pemberton, the colonel's pretty daughter, was now sixteen years of age—just one year older than Paul, her brother, the youth we have mentioned as being asleep on the Dearborn—and these three made up the family, as Mrs. Pemberton, the wife and mother, had been dead for some years. Pearl was a maiden of great loveliness, both of person and character, vivacious, sprightly and happy as a bird. Her hair was dark-brown, long and wavy, and her long drooping lashes shaded her large and lustrous brown eyes.

Her profile was Grecian in type, and exposure to wind and sun on this journey had slightly tanned her fair face, but this only enhanced her fresh young beauty. She was attired in a neat riding-habit, with tight-fitting basque, and her feet were incased in high-topped French boots. A wide-brimmed hat of straw, bedecked with flowers now wilted by the sun, was held upon her head in jaunty style by a ribbon

of rose color; while, free flying in the wind of her speed, flaunted the wealth of her silken tresses.

Her horse was a clean-limbed half-breed, well marked for speed and endurance, and her saddle and bridle were highly ornamented; while a belt of richly stamped leather supported a five-chambered Colt's revolver and a small bowie-knife. All in all, maid and mustang presented a very pretty picture.

It must not be supposed that the guide whom Colonel Pemberton had secured had neglected to point out the dangers that might possibly spring up in the path of the wagon-train, for Old Rocky had done so frequently—in fact, he had rather exaggerated them, on account of his anxiety in regard to Pearl, who, disregarding his advice, would persist in galloping away from the train on side trails whenever it suited her sweet will to do so.

So frequent, however, had been this willful disobedience on her part—she laughing at the words of warning and anxious manner of the old scout, and pretending not to hear the cautions of her father—that both the men became much less concerned, and made fewer attempts to restrain her. Yet upon this particular occasion they seemed to have an unusual apprehension, although neither of them could have explained why they felt more anxious than ever before, unless it was from the fact that the San Saba was a favorite point of the Comanches and Apaches to camp, when on their way either up or down country, especially in the vicinity just ahead of them, near the junction of the San Saba and Colorado.

Old Rocky, the scout, was a most peculiar character—a typical scout of the olden time—to whom a trail which could not be distinguished by unskilled eyes was plainer than the printed page of a book—literally so, for he knew not how to read. He was of medium height, his shoulders slightly round, his features regular, his face somewhat wrinkled, and his skin deeply bronzed—nearly as dark, in fact, as that of the red foes, who so dreaded to hear his wild and vengeful yell.

His hair, originally black, was now sprinkled with gray, as were also his whiskers and beetling brows; while his piercing dark blue, almost black, eyes were deeply set. Tattered buckskin breeches, thrust into the tops of cowhide boots, a blue woolen shirt open at the neck and a battered black sombrero, made up his attire; he being armed with the usual Colt's navy revolver, bowie and rifle, and having a canteen, blankets, malettos, lassoos, etc., attached to his saddle.

The colonel was armed in the same manner, but clothed in a serviceable suit of homespun, of a butternut brown color. He was robust and powerful in build, with a fair, round face; good-nature being betrayed in the expression of his mild blue eyes. An observer would have decided that the ranchero had, thus far, led a life comparatively free from grief and trouble; and indeed, the death of his wife had been the only serious loss he had ever experienced.

On the other hand, in connection with the appearance of Old Rocky, one would at once know that the scout had walked hand in hand with deadly dangers for years, and privation and hardships had left their seal upon his sun and smoke-tanned face. His manner and glance of eye proved him accustomed to constant peril, he being ever on the alert; while his wiry frame and nervous gaze and motion indicated that he was not only of lightning-like movements, but sinewy, agile, and of great muscular strength.

The horse of the old scout was lame in one of its fore-legs, and appeared to be old, it being as raw-boned as its rider, but still of quick movement and keen gaze. In fact, it was a most deceptive animal, being not only of great endurance, but fleet in speed, having many times saved Old Rocky from capture or death, by "makin' hit's huffs fly lively," as the scout would put it.

"Thar ain't no use ter holler, curnil," he now reasoned, as Pearl Pemberton galloped away; "yer leetle gal air a chip o' ther ole block, an' air bound ter hev her own way. She's jist like yerself in thet 'spect, fer I've bin reasonin' with yer fer three suns not to meander furdur westward, an' still yer keeps on. I'm reckonin' when yer hears 'bout a hunderd Curmanch, bellyuns g'in thar yelps, an' lunge towards ther train, yer'll 'member what this ole coon hev bin spit-tin' out all erlong, an'll wish yer had located furdur down country."

"Ef my nag warn't so cussed limpy I'd skute et speed arter ther leetle gal, fer I jist sw'ar hit pucksers my ole gizzard all up ter see her glide on ahead all erlong, when, fer all we-uns knows thar may be some painted red piruts layin' in ther bush, fer ter scoop her in. I hain't see'd no sign, but I'm consider'ble worried all ther same, though I'll own I w'u'dn't keer a snap ef Miss Pearl warn't in ther outfit."

"She is entirely too venturesome, I know," returned the colonel, with some anxiety in his face, "but, as you say, she has a will of her own, and laughs at our fears for her safety. For myself, I am perfectly satisfied with this section of the country—indeed, it surpasses my hopes and anticipations."

"The San Saba is more than it has been represented. There is no better range for stock in

the world, I am confident; and I shall not go beyond the line of timber ahead. Don't worry about Pearl. She will not ride beyond the river."

"Waal, I doesn't reckon she will, curnil, seein' hit's only 'bout a hour ter sunset, an' ther timmer air full a mile wide, 'sides being thick with underbrush; an' es ter yer not keepin' on furdur, hit 'u'd be plum dang foolishness ter even cross beyond ther bottom. I'm inclined ter 'vise yer ter skute down-stream ter ther Colorado, fer we're purty nigh ther trail o' war-parties goin' down-country."

"I opines strongly thet we-uns ain't more'n a mile er two from ther ole Curmanch' trail."

"We will inspect the country hereabouts to-morrow, Old Rocky, and see how the land lies. It may not be as favorable a place to establish a ranch where you propose, near the junction of the rivers."

For some time the old scout and the ranchero conversed in this strain. Meanwhile Pearl had gained the bottom-timber, and had disappeared; but the eyes of Old Rocky had marked the exact spot where she had seemingly rounded a bend, and, the maiden being no longer within view, his anxiety and apprehension became greatly increased, and he urged his horse forward regardless of the lameness of the beast.

Colonel Pemberton soon decided, by the manner of the guide, that the latter was quite anxious; and, fearing Old Rocky had observed indications of danger that menaced Pearl, he drove spurs and followed; but neither of them spoke a word, both gazing up and down the dark shades, and listening intently.

Soon the scout reached the margin of the timber, where he drew rein, as did also the colonel.

For a moment all within the comparatively dark shades was still and silent as death. Then, from the direction of the river, shooting through the arches of the timber, and sounding most weird and startling, came a piercing shriek, prolonged, and expressive of deathly dread and horror.

They knew that it came from Pearl!

The beautiful girl was in some fearful danger.

A deep groan burst from Colonel Pemberton.

Old Rocky gave one look into the eyes of the planter—a look of reproach, an expression of "I told you so," then the scout's face contorted with vengeful fury, as he clutched his rifle, and drove spurs—his horse, with a snort of surprise and pain, dashing into the dense shades.

The colonel followed after, too paralyzed with anguish to speak.

Barely had the pair gone ten yards into the undergrowth when the rattling discharge of revolvers struck their ears, close following the sharp whip-like report of a rifle, causing the agonized father to groan aloud, and then spur madly, crashing through the bushes, both being almost directly filled with wonder and relief by a rattling revolver fusillade.

CHAPTER II.

RATTLER TO THE RESCUE.

COLONEL PEMBERTON had disposed of, and departed from his ranch on the San Antonio some weeks previous to the time when we meet him on the Rio San Saba; and it was about one month before their departure, that Pearl had met with an adventure, which was destined to change her thoughts and hopes. In short, she had met one who, at almost first sight, chained her admiration, and awakened a love that was pure and lasting.

Pearl was a typical Texas girl, and never happier than when upon a fleet horse, and dashing over the flower-bespangled prairie. So skilled was she in this respect, that she often rode some of the half-wild steeds that ranged near her home—lassoing them herself, and taking great pride in subduing them at her will.

Many times had her father warned her against such needless dangers, and to avoid worrying him, she would ride quite a distance from her home, lasso a horse on the prairie, change her equipments, leaving her own steed staked to grass, and then skim over the wide plain, in wild glee, until she was weary.

It was during one of these reckless rides that she met with the adventure referred to—an adventure that brought her near to death, but resulted in the dawning of a new life, and one previously undreamed of by her. But, to explain:

After considerable trouble, on the occasion referred to, Pearl had at last cast her lasso noose over the head of a superb mustang, and by a skillful management of her own animal, and a dexterous use of the slack of her lasso, had thrown her captive to the earth.

Bounding to the sward, she had then sprung forward, and secured her kerchief about the eyes of her captive, before he could regain his feet, thus blinding the animal effectually. After this it was not a very difficult task to change the saddle and bridle from the one animal to the other. This done, Pearl sprung into the saddle, and leaning forward drew the handkerchief from the eyes of the trembling and affrighted beast.

For a moment the mustang stood, shaking in

every limb, its eyes starting and glaring. Then slowly he sunk back on his haunches, and with a snort bounded high in air, darting forward like a projectile from a catapult. The girl maintained her seat in the saddle, laughing and giving outcries of taunt and derision to the captive beast.

Directly west galloped the wild half-breed, guided by its fair captor, the timber of the river being but a quarter of a mile to the south of them.

Never had Pearl Pemberton felt more joyous, free, and happy. Never had she found herself upon a horse more graceful, and lightning-like in movement. On, like a ground-skimming swallow, went the glossy black; the maiden laughing, in glee, at all the endeavors of the animal to free itself from the strange burden which it carried. In no other position could Pearl have appeared more beautiful; indeed she was enchanting in the extreme, as she thus dashed over the plain.

So gratified and delighted was she, that she gave no thought to the distance she was placing between herself and her home. Owing to the sameness of the view on all sides, the only means she had of calculating the distance traveled was by the speed she had maintained, and the time thus passed; and so occupied had she been in guiding and restraining her prize, that she had no idea of the lapse of time. Consequently she was far beyond the most remote point to which she had ever previously ridden.

However, there seemed no cause for alarm, as all she had to do was to turn her horse about, and gallop on the back trail.

In this way the young girl had proceeded at headlong speed, until her horse began to breathe in a panting manner, and its sides became flecked with foam, she no longer keeping a tight rein.

Singing as she thus rode, Pearl heard not the loud outcries of warning that sounded from the direction of the line of timber to the south, and but a slight distance from her position. Had she gazed over her left shoulder, she would have beheld a horseman galloping at terrific speed in a quartering direction from the green shades, toward her; he wildly gesticulating, and waving his sombrero to attract her attention. But this was unseen and unheard by her.

The horseman, who had thus suddenly come upon the scene, darting from the cool shades of the bottom-timber, was a young man of great personal beauty and physical strength, judging from his appearance in the saddle. A single glance was sufficient to show that he was a brave and honest fellow, born to command the regard and respect of all who came as friends within the influence of his presence.

He had long wavy brown hair, his form was strongly built; and, as his movements, and glance indicated, full of vim and fire. He was clad in the frontier rig of that day—namely, an embroidered buckskin suit, with a broad black sombrero of soft felt. A red silk sash was twisted about his waist, and he wore also a stamped belt upon which were carried a pair of Colt's army size revolvers and a bowie-knife.

Around his sombrero, acting as a band, was the stuffed skin of a rattlesnake; the natural appearance of the reptile's head being preserved by jeweled eyes, and an artificial red tongue protruding.

Thus armed and appareled, appeared the young man, who now sped over the prairie toward Pearl; he being mounted upon a magnificent dark bay horse, that was a very picture of equine grace and beauty.

The broad silver clasp on the belt of this man, whose age could not have exceeded two-and-twenty, was richly bordered with engraving; and deep cut, in crescent shape, on the face of the same was his prairie sobriquet, for which his hat band acted as a symbol:

"RATTLER."

And, in smaller letters, beneath this was the well known motto of Paul Jones:

"DON'T TREAD ON ME!"

As now, in long-reaching bounds, the horse of the ranger gained upon the fair rider, he ceased his outcries, detecting in the silvery song of the girl the reason why she had failed to hear him. Realizing that his efforts to warn her were useless, and that if he continued to yell, it would but frighten her horse and increase her peril, he drove spurs, clinched his teeth, and quickly coiling his lasso in his left arm, adjusted the noose properly in his right, his horse shooting madly forward.

At this instant, as the young ranger gained a nearer position, the animal ridden by Pearl sprang to one side, frightened by a coyote that was sneaking in the grass; and, at the same time, the horse caught sight of the pursuing ranger fast quartering toward it. This caused the recently-captured mustang to bound suddenly forward, almost unseating its fair rider.

Just then Pearl discovered, in her near front—so near that it seemed impossible to avoid destruction and death—a narrow barranca—the tall grass on each side so bleeding that the

chasm could not be detected until one was close upon it.

This explained the manner and actions of the Texas Rattler; but poor Pearl had neither heard nor seen him.

Instantly she brought all her strength to bear upon the bridle-reins, her face as pale as death, and her eyes staring in horror upon the dark break in the plain. The stranger was prompt in his conclusions, and in acting upon them.

Slipping the lasso-noose quickly to his left hand, with the slack coil, he jerked his revolver, at the same time yelling:

"Free your foot from the stirrup, and be firm for your life! Fear not—I'll save you!"

Barely had the last words left the lips of Rattler, when the horse of Pearl reached within one mad bound of the barranca edge, gathering its quivering muscles for the desperate leap that must end in death. Then the sharp report of the ranger's revolver rung out, and the horse, with a shriek that was almost human, fell prostrate, its hind-legs broken by the bullet, and its fore-legs hanging over the margin of the barranca, into which it began to slip, in its violent struggles.

Pearl Pemberton had been dazed with horror.

She knew but too well that her horse could not be held up in time. So terrified was she, that her strength left her, but she had sufficient control over herself to obey the instructions of Rattler. Then followed the report of the revolver, and the fall of her horse half over the deep chasm, down which the poor girl gave a glance that seemed like gazing into the shadows of death—a glance that caused the yell of the ranger and the report of the revolver to be banished from her mind, as she closed her eyes, as she believed, forever upon earth.

Only for an instant did Pearl thus hover, between life and death, over that awful chasm; then she sunk into insensibility, at the same time that the ranger's lasso encircled her form and the noose tightened about her slender waist, binding her limp arms to her side.

Just then, down into the barranca, with an unearthly shriek, shot the wounded mustang. Then, as his lasso shot true to his aim, Rattler jerked his steed to a halt. The raw-hide tightened straight as a bar of iron, to the edge of the chasm, the end being fastened to the saddle-horn.

Springing to the earth, the young ranger, pale as a corpse, bounded toward the barranca. Both maid and mustang had disappeared, and although he well knew that the former was safely held by his lariat, yet the strain upon his nerves and feelings had been terrible. The noble horse of the ranger stood, braced and panting, within ten feet of the barranca brink.

In a moment, Rattler bent over the edge of the gulf, and trembled as, below him, he saw slowly swaying the limp and senseless form of the girl. Never before had the young prairie ranger been so overcome with emotion. He suffered a thousand times more, as he quickly drew the fair maiden upward to safety in his arms, than she would have suffered had she been conscious.

At once the rescuer loosened the noose of the lasso from the maiden, who was then seated upon the sward. He held her as tenderly as a mother would her babe, and removing his sombrero, the Rattler gazed heavenward, as he called out, in soul-felt accents.

"Father, I thank thee for permitting me to preserve this maiden from a fearful death!"

It was a most impressive scene, there on the verge of that barranca—the handsome youth gazing with amazement and admiration into the face of the lovely girl in his arms, while the foam-flecked and panting steed stood, with its great eyes fixed in wonder and curiosity upon its master, and the seemingly lifeless maiden.

Through it all, the Southern sun blazed down upon them, in all its fiery power.

This was the scene that met the view of Pearl's father, who, having discovered his daughter's horse lariat to grass on the plain, and being worried in regard to her, had galloped westward, following her trail. He had observed, from a distance, the race of the ranger in pursuit of her, and he understood the object of the stranger but too well; for Colonel Pemberton knew of the dangerous barranca.

It would be impossible to describe the agony of mind experienced by the ranchero, as he witnessed, from a distance, the events that have been recorded.

Rattler detected the approach of the colonel, and decided that he was some relative of the maiden; but he kept his position, still chafing the arms of Pearl, where the tightly drawn lasso noose had bound them to her side.

CHAPTER III.

A FATHER'S GRATITUDE.

WHEN Colonel Pemberton dashed at headlong speed up to the barranca bank, and saw his apparently dead child in the arms of her rescuer, he threw himself from his panting steed, his face as devoid of color as that of poor Pearl.

When it is considered that the colonel knew his daughter to be brave, reckless, self-reliant,

and strong of nerve, it is not strange that, as he now looked upon her, he believed her to be dead. He trembled as if stricken with an ague-fit, while he staggered like a drunken man, as he strove to cross the intervening space between his horse and where she was.

Surmising, by the evident mental suffering of the stranger, that he was the father of the maiden, the young ranger quickly spoke:

"Do not be alarmed, sir; the young lady has only fainted. Be so good as to pass that canteen from my saddle, and I think we shall soon have the pleasure of seeing her herself again, although she has had a very narrow escape."

"God bless you for those words!" said the colonel; "I trust you may be right, and that my darling is not dead, as she appears to be. Such a shock as I have had! She is all I have—my pet, my only daughter!"

Procuring the canteen, the ranchero hastened to Rattler's side; but he dropped the vessel, sunk upon his knees, and, with tears rolling down his cheeks, clasped Pearl in his arms, while he muttered words of endearment. The young ranger promptly relinquished Pearl to her father, as he said:

"Control yourself, my dear sir! We must try and recover your daughter at once. I was obliged to lasso her to prevent her going down with her horse, and she may have received some injuries."

The young man spoke hurriedly, meanwhile dashing water from his canteen over the head of the maiden, and sprinkling the same in her face, his looks and movements betraying great concern.

The colonel seemed not to hear a word the ranger uttered. His whole attention was centered upon his child, who indeed, for a time appeared devoid of life.

The application of the water, however, soon had its effect; for Pearl uttered a low moan, sighed heavily, and then opened her eyes. But before this, Rattler, who perceived that she was fast reviving, arose to his feet, and strode to the side of his horse, patting the head of the noble animal affectionately.

During the short time that he had seen the young lady, in his pursuit of her, the ranger had realized that she was a daring and skilled horsewoman, and possessed of wonderful nerve; for he knew, by the actions of the mustang that now lay crushed in a shapeless mass on the barranca bed, that the animal had been newly "roped." Hence he had been the more concerned, as had been her father, by her death-like condition. And, although her life had depended upon his acting as he had, the young man felt greatly shocked at the thought of his having lassoed her in such a rude manner, as had been unavoidable; that her fair form now undoubtedly bore the livid marks of the raw-hide lariat, and also that he had yelled at her in so commanding a tone.

Leaning against his horse, the ranger turned his gaze once more to the ranchero, seated upon the sward, still holding his daughter in his arms.

The ranchero was now uttering words of endearment; and greatly to the relief and joy of Rattler, he saw that the maiden was now entirely conscious. He felt prompted to steal away from the spot, for he had a presentiment that, if he gazed into the eyes of that young girl, and held converse with her, his future peace of mind would be jeopardized.

He had been most strangely and unaccountably impressed by her, and he reasoned that that influence would be ten thousand times stronger when he met her face to face, after her recovery. But Rattler had but little time for meditation. When the first paroxysm of joy and thankfulness was over, Pearl, recalling the warning voice she had heard previous to the report of the revolver, and knowing that the voice had not been that of her father, struggled from her parent's embrace—the thought that she owed her life to a stranger flashing through her mind.

Not a word had poor Pearl, thus far, been able to articulate, except to murmur, in a child-like manner, "Papa! oh, papa!" but now she sprang erect and her brain became clear at once.

The colonel also arose to his feet, realizing that both he and his daughter had been derelict in their duty, in not at once paying thanks to the one who had, in so daring and skillful a manner, saved Pearl from death.

Colonel Pemberton, his face beaming with joy and gratitude, strove to clasp his daughter's hand, with the evident intention of leading her forward, and introducing her to her rescuer; the eyes of the ranchero being, for the first time, fixed upon the face of the handsome stranger in mingled curiosity and admiration, but his child was her own bright, impulsive self again, and she stepped toward Rattler, her beautiful face radiant, and thankfulness beyond expression in words mirrored in the depths of her glorious eyes.

The rich red blood showed plainly through the sun-tan on the young ranger's face, and his heart throbbed as it had never before. Ever frank and open had the brave Texan been, but now he was utterly incapable of advancing a

step to meet the being who, by that first glance, had made him her slave for life.

He had indeed met his fate!

Of this he felt fully assured by the strange and overpowering emotions that ruled him, and he firmly believed that all had been decreed by the Fates—that he had been guided, at the moment of all moments, to the rescue of the fair girl before him.

Pearl advanced hesitatingly, her form trembling and her lips apart. For the first time in her young life she was speechless from her emotions, so new and strange were they.

The man before her was a veritable prince of the prairies—one of nature's noblemen.

Such the fair Pearl decided was her rescuer at the first glance, and she, as well as he had done, realized on the instant that she had met one whom she would be proud to love and reverence—she, the proud and daring princess of the plain, over which she so oft had galloped, had at last met the one before whom she bowed.

When his daughter stepped forward, the colonel, believing that she would, in a most proper and appropriate manner, thank the stranger, decided to delay his own expressions of gratitude for a moment longer; he therefore strode to the brink of the barranca, and bending forward, peered down into the depths upon the dark and shapeless mass far below—all that remained of the handsome black mustang, so recently full of life and fire.

A shudder ran through his frame as he thought of what might have been.

This movement of Colonel Pemberton was a most timely one, for it occurred at the moment that both the ranger and the maiden were standing facing each other, speechless and motionless. It was but a moment, however. Both threw off the embarrassment that ruled them at the same instant, and advancing toward each other, the young man said quickly, in a rich though slightly tremulous voice:

"My dear young lady, I beg you will not tax yourself by any attempts at conversation at present, for you have received a terrible shock, and I fear that you are now suffering from the effects of my lasso. Permit me to say that I admire your great fortitude under the fearful strain you have experienced.

"I may certainly express myself to this extent without your thinking me rude, and too familiar on our extremely brief acquaintance."

The open and winning manner of the ranger, although he expressed himself so formally, placed Pearl in a much less embarrassing position, and she extended both her hands, as she replied:

"Thanks, very much"—this with a glance which spoke volumes—"thanks for your kind solicitude! I expected as much from one who has placed me so deeply in his debt.

"Words are but tame to express my gratitude to the one who preserved me from a terrible death. My name is Pearl Pemberton."

"And I," returned the young man, "am known as the 'Rattling Ranger,' or Raybold, the Rattler, whose nicknames have been thrust upon me, my real name being Reginald Raybold. But, Miss Pearl, your thanks are entirely uncalled for. It is I who ought to thank you, for thus having made it possible for me to do you a service. Your words and presence make me the happiest man in the Lone Star State.

"I see your father approaching," he continued, "and I should advise your returning at once to your home, and attending to the injuries which I am positive you must have received.

"Colonel Pemberton"—turning to the ranchero—"I am pleased to meet yourself and daughter. I have known you for some time by reputation, and I trust our friendship, so strangely formed, may be a lasting one. No"—interrupting the colonel, who was about to speak—"do not mention my service in the way of further thanks.

"It is enough of pleasure and self-gratulation to know that I have been privileged to be the means of saving Miss Pemberton from death in the barranca. Please do not speak of it again."

"Your hand, sir!" exclaimed the ranchero. "You have done me the greatest service that one man could do another. More than life to me is the life of my daughter—she and my son being all who are left to me in this world; and I would be less than human did I not, to the full extent of words and acts, manifest my gratitude to one whom I shall, unto my dying day, be proud to call my friend!"

"This is none other than Raybold, the Rattling Ranger, papa," put in Pearl. "You know we have heard so much of him."

"Can it be possible?" exclaimed the colonel, again clasping the hand of the young man; "I am, indeed, proud to know you, Mr. Raybold, and I would rather owe you thanks and friendship than any man I can call to mind."

"Thanks! But let us change the subject if you please. Colonel, we are inconsiderate. You must return to your home at once. You know that your daughter requires attention; that my cruel lasso must have made a very

painful impression upon her waist and arms, although she bore it with Indian-like fortitude.

"Miss Pearl, allow me to assist you to mount my horse!"

"And you?" chorused the father and daughter.

"I will walk by the side of my steed, and will trespass for an hour or so upon your hospitality, until I learn the extent of Miss Pemberton's hurts."

"Rattler, my friend, never speak of trespassing. From this on my home is yours!"

"I thank you, colonel," said the ranger, as he assisted the maiden to his saddle: her features but slightly betraying the pain she suffered—a pain which became more torturing, as her excitement became lessened.

And, by the side of his horse, the young ranger walked along, conversing with Pearl; their eyes at times meeting in glances that intensified the new-born love in the hearts of both. All proceeded toward Pemberton Ranch, the heart of the father being too full of joy and gratitude to speak as they thus journeyed.

Pearl Pemberton was transformed. Her whole being was changed, from a free and careless maiden into a loving and considerate woman, opening to her a possible life, that was heavenly even in the contemplation. For she could not think otherwise than that this handsome and gallant ranger and herself had been brought together for their mutual good and happiness.

CHAPTER IV.

THE COMANCHE'S SWOOP.

OUR three friends reached the ranch in due time, the maiden not appearing to have suffered greatly from the rough experiences she had undergone. She was at once taken in charge by the housekeeper, and her injuries attended to; Paul asserting, when he heard of the livid marks that had been left by the rope, that his sister had good cause to remember Rattler, the Ranger.

The welcome the latter had received from Paul Pemberton was exceedingly friendly, for the boy had often heard of the exploits of the ranger on the frontier, in battling both outlaws and red men. As the latter had, at that time, no particular call for his services, he was easily prevailed upon to remain at the ranch for some days; the maiden frequently being in his company. We need hardly say that the pair became each day more and more dear to each other.

Paul and Rattler made frequent hunting and fishing-trips, while the colonel and the ranger spent the evenings talking over the fine prospects for stock-raising, at different points west of San Antonio. At this time, Colonel Pemberton had disposed of his ranch, and was intending soon to establish a new home on the frontier.

He had already half decided to proceed westward as far as the Rio San Saba, and although Rattler pronounced it the most favorable place for stock-raising, he asserted that it would be imprudent for any one to locate on that river for some years to come; recommending instead a point on the Rio Llano, in the vicinity of Fort Mason.

Much was said on this topic by both, but the colonel was naturally headstrong, and was unwilling to change his mind. In this way time passed at Pemberton Ranch, the ranger being unable to tear himself away from the beautiful girl whom he had rescued, and whom he loved with all the strength of his nature.

But this, to Raybold a pleasant and most happy summer dream, was doomed to end very suddenly, for he was recalled to his duty by a report of outlaw outrages near Fort Clark.

He had been on detached service, carrying dispatches, previous to his providential meeting with Pearl Pemberton. In two months more, the command of the rangers, to which he had attached himself for reasons to be shown, would be disbanded, and then he promised himself much pleasure in again meeting with the Pembertons, when all were either en route for the Rio Llano, or had arrived at that point. He pleaded with both Paul and Pearl, to use all their influence toward inducing their father to abandon his idea of settling on the San Saba, where dangers from the Indians were great; many Texans who had settled there having been, together with their families, massacred within the year.

The colonel had grown to regard Raybold almost as a son, holding him in high regard, and although he could not help perceiving that his idolized daughter and the young ranger were in love with each other, he made no objections. He had every confidence in this gallant stranger, of whose previous history nothing was known to him.

When the youthful pair parted they were plighted lovers, and Raybold left Pemberton Ranch with the heartfelt prayers of the Pearl of the Prairie following him.

For some days after the young man's departure all were quite despondent at the ranch, for his very presence had been a constant cheer to them; he being the great object of their attentions, and the life of the party. But this

despondency was banished by bright hopes for the future. Pearl was now anxious to leave the old home, whereas previously she had battled bravely against its disposal. Now, however, she felt that the handsome ranger would meet them on the border, would then ask her hand of her father, and would establish a home for her in that vicinity.

Having thus, in a measure, explained the reasons for our friends being upon the far frontier, and their hopes for the future, we will next take up their trail at a time when the colonel found good cause to regret, from his inmost soul, not having taken the advice of Raybold, and that of the guide he had secured at San Antonio.

The outfit, as we have seen, arrived in the vicinity of the San Saba, Colonel Pemberton insisting upon settling on that stream. Pearl had become more and more light-hearted as they had proceeded on their journey, for she believed that every mile they passed over brought her nearer to Rattler the Ranger; and her daring solitary gallops when the San Saba was approached, had been made in the hope of meeting with the one who ruled her heart so entirely.

Old Rocky, the guide, had informed her that the command to which the young ranger served as scout had disbanded at Fort Belknap; the young ranger would therefore probably reach the San Saba about the same time as the train. But the young man would hardly expect them to be there, after his having advised the colonel so strongly against it; especially as war-parties of Comanches had recently driven back many settlers from up the Colorado and Brazos, the border being besides infested with outlaws of the worst description.

We have mentioned the fact of Pearl's having started off in a joyous mood toward the timberline that marked the course of the San Saba. She little dreamed of the horrors in store for her, little thought of the wild and savage and bloodthirsty fiends who were then lurking within those dense shades.

Old Rocky had asserted that it was quite a distance from the border of the timber to the river, and, generally speaking, in that particular section it was so; but, as it happened, at the point to which Pearl guided her horse, there was a cove in the woods, which appeared to indicate that it was formed by a bend in the timber.

The fact was, however, that the inner portion of this cove-like opening in the towering wood was quite near to the river, which was more shallow at that point than elsewhere, affording a crossing-place for wild beasts or travelers. The opposite side was in exact contrast, the north bank being high cliffs, broken by dark fissures, ravines, and gulches, all hidden from view by the heavy timber.

Directly in front of the crossing spoken of, the approach to which had evidently been frequently used by Indians in large mounted war-parties, there was a break in the high bank. This had the appearance of a huge rent caused by some powerful convulsion of Nature, and extended away from the river in a crooked course. The scene was as wild and rugged as could well be imagined.

Pearl Pemberton drew her horse to a halt, uttering a low exclamation of surprise, so different was the further side of the stream from that upon which she had halted. Her horse, however, was not to be restrained, but persisted in drinking the cool, slow-flowing waters; it therefore plunged into the stream, which, as has been said, was at that point quite shallow. Pearl slackened the reins, and gazed across the stream, and upon the wild scene beyond, with feelings not entirely devoid of apprehension; although not a living object was within view, all around being silent, except the ripple of the stream.

But a very short time the young girl thus sat, while a cold chill, a nameless dread, crept over her, which was most unaccountable, and not unlike the feeling experienced by some when they suddenly discover a huge serpent in their path.

Her cheeks paled, and she was about to whirl her horse about, and return toward the wagon-train, which she felt sure would encamp in the cove, when suddenly her eye caught a moving object ahead.

One flashing glance sufficed, and then Pearl, with a glad cry of joy, urged her horse on through the stream to the opposite side. Some half-way across the river had her steed waded, when into full view, around a huge boulder that lay in the bed of the gorge, dashed none other than the Rampant Ranger—the man of all men she had hoped and prayed to meet!

The young man gazed for a moment bewildered, and then drove spurs, dashing toward the ford; but only to behold, the next instant, the scene transform into one that stayed the blood in his veins, causing him to jerk his revolvers, and with set teeth, to dash at terrific speed down the bed of the gulch.

And no wonder was it, for, the very moment that Pearl had urged her horse forward, and had passed around the big rock, a dozen paint-daubed, feather-bedizened Comanches darted from the bushes, some springing afar out into

the water toward the young girl, while lassoes circled and hissed through the air, several nooses encircling the form of Pearl, and the neck of her horse!

Never perhaps was a human being so suddenly and unexpectedly plunged into the dark depths of despair, and sickening terror—from the most intense, overpowering joy and relief, to dread unutterable—as was poor Pearl, when the hideous demons appeared before her, and the hissing lassoes inclosed, and tightened cruelly around her!

Deathlike was her face, her eyes starting, and the blood chilled in her veins; for, not only was she a captive, but, as she felt sure, was doomed to witness the murder of the man she loved—the one so noble, true, and brave, and at the very moment when she had expected to be clasped to his breast!

The hapless maiden could not utter a single cry; she was paralyzed with the horrible transformation and the deadly danger that surrounded herself and her lover.

More like a corpse than a living being was poor Pearl as she was dragged from her horse by bronzed arms, while snake-like eyes glared exultantly and gloatingly into hers; but, as she felt the repulsive touch of the red demons, shriek after shriek shot from her lips.

Quickly the painted braves dragged her through the waters to the bank, one leading her horse, and others bounding to meet the on-rushing ranger; the click of hoofs having warned them of his approach.

Pearl gave one look up the gulch, as the Comanches reached the bank with her, and that glance revealed Raybold dashing, like a demi-god, down upon the red foe, his face pale, his revolvers tight clutched, and pointed!

This was but for an instant. Then she was forced into the thick bushes, and amid the rough rocks, while her ears were filled with the reports of revolvers, and horrible yells. In another moment, she lay, limp and senseless in the arms of her hideous and repulsive captors.

CHAPTER V.

SINGLE HANDED AND ALONE.

No man ever felt stronger relief and joy than did the Rampant Ranger, as he realized that the picture before him was not an illusion conjured up in his imagination, but that he really beheld Pearl Pemberton hastening over the ford to meet him.

It was not strange that, at first, he questioned his sense of sight; for he had not believed that Colonel Pemberton would advance westward as far as the San Saba, and besides he had not supposed that the ranchero would have gained the river mentioned at such an early day. Language could not express the joy and relief he experienced for one brief moment, or the dumfounded amazement and anguish that so instantly banished his joy, upon beholding the savages. His breath fairly left him, and his heart ceased pulsating.

Coming from the most dangerous portion of the border, believing that no Indians were eastward of him, as he had discovered no fresh "sign," the sudden appearance of the Comanches had been as startling to him as the discovery of the maiden whom he loved. It was but for a moment, however, that Rattler was rendered incapable of reason or action. As the scene changed, from what to him seemed Paradise, to a veritable Gehenna—that angelic girl in the clutch of the red demons—he himself was as suddenly transformed in object, act, and mind, as the scene had been.

Instantly the young ranger became filled with fury, a thirst for revenge, and he resolved to rescue Pearl Pemberton, or die in his tracks in the effort. Thundering down upon the red braves, a revolver in either hand flashing fire and lead, the death-yells of the Comanches, who had been confounded by his unexpected advent, filled the air, as they fell before his deadly aim.

Seeming to bear a charmed life, the arrows of the foe whizzing about him, back and forth upon his well-trained steed the now Rampant Ranger charged, until eight Indians lay dead upon the bank of the river. All this time, like an avenging god, Raybold sat his steed, the mustang panting with excitement and exertion.

Well he knew that but four of the party of savages who had been at the ford were with Pearl, but he also knew that there must be a larger force near at hand, or the Comanches would not have been without their horses. There was a camp of hostile braves near, and if these four survivors reached it, poor Pearl would be lost.

Neither the maiden nor her captors were now within view, and the young ranger was in a state of almost hopeless despair, as his keen eyes swept cliff, crag, and gorge. But the next moment, the tell tale flaunt of a feather, amid the boulders up the cliff, betrayed the position of those whom he sought.

Springing to the ground, Raybold bounded up the cliff, tearing over the rough rocks, and through patches of dwarf trees, like a madman, thrusting cartridges into his revolvers as he ran. Many times he tottered on the brink of a

deep cleft, and it was only by a superhuman effort, in his frenzied race, that he avoided being dashed to death on the rocks below. None but a man well used to such climbing could have surmounted the obstacles that barred the young ranger's way.

He knew that he was not proceeding by the same route taken by the Indians, as it would have been impossible for them to have carried their captive over such a rugged ascent; consequently he was confident that upon reaching the point where he had detected their presence, he would be able to trace them more easily, although they left no trail that could be followed except by the closest inspection, and the loss of much time.

A few moments' climbing took Raybold out of view from the ford, for the only course possible for him to pursue led around toward the river again, and through a dark and narrow cleft in the cliff, by a shelf in the rock, to fall from which was sure death.

Yet on he dashed, recklessly and madly; the shelf becoming broader and broader, and soon coming to an end at an abrupt precipice, where, full fifty feet below, rolled the dark waters of the Rio San Saba.

A groan burst from the young man, as he now realized that he had passed Pearl and her red captors, and he reasoned that they must have darted into some cavity in the side of the cliff.

As this thought flashed through his mind, an arrow whizzed through the air, the feather end whisking across his cheek, and the shaft disappearing in the branches beyond the river, at a point below his position. Whirling on the instant, the young avenger gazed up the cliff-side, above the shelf, and at a point some ten yards from his position. There, to his relief, he discovered that the rugged rocks not only afforded an easy ascent, but that there was a dark cavern-like opening, some twenty feet up from the shelf.

Darting close to the base of the rock wall, the young ranger stole along the more broken portion of the cliff, keeping his bowie in readiness, for he felt positive there would be little if any opportunity to use fire-arms in the dark cavern.

The Rattler scarcely dared think of the position, and probable state of torture that Pearl was suffering, or the fact that, should he dash upon her fiendish captors, one of them would plunge his knife in her heart.

She must be rescued at all hazards, for death was preferable to being taken west, to the villages of the Comanches.

Raybold had most certainly sufficient to occupy his mind, outside of his anguish and fear in connection with Pearl, for he was confident that the Indians were not only aware of his exact position, but that they had recognized him as one of their most dreaded foes, and whose scalp would win an eagle-feather for him who bore it to the chief of the war-party. For this reason he crawled like a snake up the rough rocks, keeping at all times his form shielded from the view of any of the Indians who were stationed at the point where he believed their covert to be.

His close pursuit, he felt positive, had forced the Comanches to secrete themselves and their captive, and prevented them from proceeding to their destination. This fact encouraged him greatly, as did his most remarkable and indeed wonderful escape from the arrows of the braves at the ford, and his success in slaying them.

Still, no mortal man could have been more cautious and stealthy in his approach, although his brain was so tortured by thoughts of the approach of night, when it would be next to impossible to rescue Pearl. Not the slightest hope of help from those of the wagon-train, which he felt sure was near at hand, had Raybold, for even the most skillful scout would not be able to trace them amid the cliffs, it having been a providential chance that had revealed to him the whereabouts of the four braves and Pearl, on both occasions—namely, by the discovery of the feather, and the course of the arrow.

Soon the young man reached what he believed to be the vicinity of the covert of those he sought; yet not the slightest sound betrayed their presence.

The Rattler felt sure that at least one of his foes was on the watch; and, could he slay this one, without alarming the others, his chance for rescuing his darling would be good.

It was just as he had decided to pass around a projection of rock, and take a peep, which he felt would reveal to him both the entrance to the cavern, and the guard, that a series of yells came from the ford. He could hardly suppress a groan, for he knew the sounds proceeded from Colonel Pemberton, who had come upon the corpses of the Indians, and now knew that his darling child had been captured by the merciless red marauders.

No less anguished would the old ranchero be, from knowing that he himself was the means of his daughter's being on the San Saba; for he had acted, in coming, against the advice of those who well knew the dangers consequent upon such a course.

The frantic shrieks of the colonel ceased abruptly, he having probably been warned by others that he would only betray their presence to the foe; and silence had lasted but a moment when the Rattler distinctly heard the guttural expressions of the Indians, within a few feet of him. It was evident that the captors of Pearl were alarmed by the sounds which they, as a matter of course, knew to proceed from their enemies; and the ranger, taking advantage of the moment of their probable negligence in watching for him, peeped around the spur of rock that shielded him from view. To his most intense relief, he perceived all four of the Comanches, muttering and gesticulating, in evident alarm and argument.

All were within an arched passage, the entrance to a cavern, and stood upon a roomy level flooring, or ledge of rock.

The sight decided Rattler upon immediate action.

Pearl must be within the cavern, and senseless. Consequently, could he succeed in dashing through the braves, slashing as he went, there was a possibility of his being able to place himself between them and his darling; thus preventing them from slaying her, unless they first killed him.

Not a moment was to be lost.

To decide, with this heroic heart, was to act.

Tightening his clutch on his bowie, Raybold gathered all his strength for his daring and most desperate attempt. His state of mind, and the object in view, made him almost invincible.

With one mad bound, he stood clear of the rocky spur, and with another he darted amid his red foes, who were dumfounded and amazed—thus being for the moment powerless. During that moment, a fearful death-yell shot from the lips of one, and the bowie-knife of the avenger slashed through the vitals of the brave. The next instant, it was buried in the heart of another.

Then followed the clash of steel, as the two remaining warriors recovered from their bewilderment and fought desperately for life.

One of these stood in the way of the Rattler's dash to the interior of the cave, and he, too, felt the blade that had pierced his comrades. With a fierce whoop the surviving savage, whose knife-wrist had been slashed, forcing him to drop the weapon, raised his hatchet in the air, watching his white foe for an opportunity to brain him.

By this time the two had struggled back and forth in the interior of the cavern to a point where the light from a torch shone from a side passage, and within his illumined space the Rattler and his last red foe battled for the mastery. The young ranger, as he succeeded in stabbing his adversary in the breast, heard a piercing shriek from the spot from which the light was shining. For one brief moment he caught a view of her whom he loved more than life, and then he knew no more; for the tomahawk of the Comanche descended upon his head and he fell upon the rock floor of the cavern, where he lay outstretched, the light from the torch playing upon his upturned, corpse-like face.

At the same time, the tomahawk fell from the grasp of the red-skin with a clang upon the rocks, but the dying brave staggered toward Pearl, who stood rigid as a statue against the cliff.

Clutching at the empty air, the warrior advanced, swaying and trembling, each step forcing a spurt of blood from his breast, while his eyes were flaming, bent upon slaying the captive, with his last strength, by strangulation, for his weapons had been left near the main entrance to the cavern.

One moment her eyes were fastened upon the face of the brave, whose glazing orbs, from out their framework of paint daubs, were bent in murderous exultation upon hers, his bronzed arms beating the air spasmodically and his fingers clutching at her throat in an awkward manner; then, as the repulsive hands touched her white neck in an effort to strangle her, the poor girl with a loud cry sunk senseless, while at the same moment a rattling and gurgling sound issued from the throat of the savage, as he fell by the side of his intended victim, without even the power to utter a death-yell.

The fiery light of the torch played upon the snow-white face of poor Pearl and upon the hideous visage of the Comanche, both lying side by side.

And beyond them, at the entrance, lay the Rampant Ranger; rampant no longer, but still and corpse-like; while, near his outstretched form were the blood-reeking braves he had vanquished in that most desperate fight, their last war-whoops, with one exception, sounded.

Death and silence ruled in the torch-illuminated cavern of the cliff.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD ROCKY ON TRAIL.

COLONEL PEMBERTON and the old scout spurred madly through the undergrowth, toward the river—the yells of the savages betraying to them, beyond all doubt, that Pearl was at least in great danger.

The rapid fusilade of revolver-shots, however, gave Old Rocky hope, for he well knew they proceeded from white men, who must be defending the young girl.

That Indians were in the locality surprised him, and also that defenders should be near at hand. The colonel, too, was satisfied that assistance had reached his daughter, when he heard the reports of the revolvers. But this gave him only slight hope, for the shrieks of Pearl had pierced him to the very soul, and satisfied him that, at the time they were uttered, his daughter had been seized by the red foe, and that she saw no avenue of escape open.

He was, in consequence, more like a madman than a sane person, as the sounds of conflict followed the heart-rending shrieks of his child.

It were scarce possible for man to suffer more excruciating mental anguish than did the ranchero, as he frantically urged his horse toward the river; passing, with a rush, past Old Rocky as he did so.

The old scout, although greatly affected, and terribly apprehensive in regard to Pearl, who was looked upon by him as a being superior to any one whom he had ever met, was too experienced in Indian ways to rush recklessly upon the scene of the conflict, without a slight halt to study the same, and calculate as to the manner of proceeding that would most favor success.

This he would have done, could he have kept the colonel by his side; but it was impossible to control the ranchero in the least. Not for an instant, however, did Old Rocky propose to delay, when his employer was ahead, and dashing perhaps to death.

Before Colonel Pemberton cleared the bushes on the south side of the river, the young ranger had settled eight of the red fiends, and had disappeared from view, from the ford, in his mad clamber to the captive's rescue.

The low bushes and high grass on the north river-bank screened the corpses of the Indians, who had been slain by Rattler, from view. The horse of the ranger had darted into a thicket, frightened by the scent of human blood, and the sight of the fierce conflict; and the animal, that had been ridden by Pearl, had been led by her captors into the mottes at the foot of the cliff.

The consequences was, that as Colonel Pemberton broke from the undergrowth into the clear space by the margin of the stream, he jerked his horse to a halt at the same place as had his daughter, in the utmost amazement; for not a living object was within view, and no sound met his ear to indicate that human beings were in the vicinity, although but a few moments previously the din of savage warfare sounded from that very spot.

Pearl, it will be remembered, had been astounded, and impressed with awe, at the unexpected scene that had opened out before, and above her; but her father was doubly dumfounded, not only at the unlooked-for contrast between the north bank and that upon which he was, but from the silence, so deep after the din, and the absence of those whom he had expected to see, as well as Pearl.

Horried, anguished and dazed, the old ranchero sat his horse, gazing at the rough rocky cliffs, and up the gorge in his immediate front; but the guide, the next moment, shot from the undergrowth, upon his panting horse, and also drew rein, crying out, in the extremity of wonder:

"Jumpin' Jericho! Whar in thunderation air ther red bellyuns an' ther leetle gal? I'd ha' sworn ther rumpus war hyer, an' I'm dang'd ef hit warn't, er my years air chuck-full o' bugs, an' I'm losin' my hearin'!"

"Spur on, curnil, 'cross ther drink, an' I reckon we'll light onter somethin' what talks 'sign.' I'm dead sure Miss Pearl crossed hyer—fact air, I knows hit, fer thar's ther critter's tracks in ther mud. Come on, ole pard, er I shell go plum lunified, es well es yerself; an' one on us hes gut ter keep squar' on his ideas, er ther hull outfit's ruined. Hit war mighty onlucky fer yer leetle gal ter skute ahead, an' I knowed hit; but hit's too late ter think o' thet now."

"I tole her, an' so did yeou, but she's es headstrong es her old dad. We'll strike somethin' t'other side, curnil. Keep cool, an' don't worritate, er yer won't be wo'th shucks. Keep yer peepers wide open, fer thar's red scalpers hyeraways, sure an' sart'in."

Old Rocky rattled off these words in a lively manner, affecting to be much less worried and apprehensive than he really was, in order not to deepen the concern and anguish of his employer.

As he spoke he urged his horse into the stream, his weapons ready, his keen eyes sweeping and scanning every thicket and boulder in gulch and cliff, and undergrowth, on every side of them.

Little less amazed and puzzled was the old scout than the colonel, at the wild and silent scene, within which it did not seem that a human being had been. As for the ranchero, he did not appear conscious that the guide had spoken; his countenance being torturing to contemplate, and Old Rocky avoided looking at him from the first.

Paralyzed and speechless was the distressed father, and he appeared to have aged years since the shrieks of his loved child had shot through his brain like darts of white-hot steel. For a time he made not the slightest effort to cross the river.

Both the horses drank, unmindful of jerk of rein, so thirsty were they; but the old scout soon spurred up the north bank, and on his steed bounded, but only to almost instantly rear, and spring to one side, with a snort of terror; for the animal nearly brought its hoofs down upon the bloody corpses of the Comanches!

"Great Crockett!" was the ejaculation of Old Rocky, in the utmost surprise, mingled with satisfaction and exultation; "dang'd ef I didn't know I war kerrect! Somebuddy hev laid out a sprinklin' o' ther cantankerous cusses, sure es shootin'; but who war hit, an' whar air they an' ther leetle gal?"

"Dod-gast hit, ef this biz ain't gittin' some consider'ble mixed! Hit'd sorter suit me, ef I c'd jist git my peepers onter Miss Pearl—dang'd ef hit wouldn't!"

Colonel Pemberton, as he perceived the hideous corpses, uttered a deep groan, and then cried out, in a voice that expressed his suffering:

"Lost! lost! My darling, my Pearl, is in the power of the merciless Indians! Oh, God! It is more than I can bear. It is worse than death to me, and to her—Heavens! I cannot think of it."

"Cursed be the day I decided to settle on the San Saba, scorning all advice to the contrary! Oh, God of mercy, protect my poor child!"

As the ranchero made this anguished appeal his strong form trembled, his eyes were wild and staring, and his face deathly in its pallor.

"Jist yer keep a stiff upper lip, curnil," advised Old Rocky, as he sprung to the ground, and stole about among the slain, examining the corpses and their surroundings.

"Ef ther leetle gal air tuck, we-uns hes gut ter resky her, an' yer won't be es sarviceable es a yaller dog, ef yer wilts inter yer boots with worritatin', es I said afore."

"Her nag air gone, an' Pearl, too, which inclernates toward captur'; but I'm bamboozled bad es 'gards ther run o' ther game. Who war hyer, ter plug lead inter ther red scum so lively, an' whar hev he—ef thar warn't but one, es I'm opinin'—levanted tu, ef hit ain't arter ther leetle gal?"

"Thet's hit, dead sure; so, curnil, brace up! What's this? Why, cuss my cats!"

The last was said in great astonishment, mingled with relief and pleasure, as Old Rocky, half-bent, and with revolver in hand, sprung along the plain trail of a horse, through the grass toward the thickets on the east base of the gorge.

The colonel seemed entirely broken and hopeless, sitting upon his horse, and staring in horror at the dead Comanches.

The old scout disappeared in the bushes, and soon returned, leading the horse of the young ranger.

"I tole yer, curnil, to brace up!" he said encouragingly; "I tole yer somebuddy war arter yer leetle gal ter resky her, an' now I knows who hit air. Texas Rattler air on ther trail! He's ther boyee what tuck ther reds in outen ther wet, an' hyer's his nag an' tricks."

"Fac' air, he laid out ther heft o' ther hell-yuns, but t'others gut away with Pearl, an' he's skuted arter 'em. They tuck ter ther rocks, er he wouldn't ha' left his horse."

"Texas Rattler!" exclaimed the ranchero, with deep feeling. "Heaven has again sent him to save my child! And she may yet be saved!"

"Rocky, my friend, should I be thus blessed, the train shall be headed back to the Llano at once. Hope returns, now that I know Rattler was here, and that he defended Pearl. But hold! The Indians may have captured them both!"

That Old Rocky had not for a moment thought of this possibility, and was greatly startled by its being probable, was shown by his silence, and the expression upon his face. He halted in his tracks, near the colonel, and gazed about the gulch, meanwhile listening very intently. This he did, because he wished to avoid looking at his employer, and to gain time for thought.

But, at that very instant, as if to banish all doubts that the words of the ranchero raised in his mind, he heard faintly, and in a strange manner which baffled any attempt to locate the sound except as to the westward, the death-yell of a Comanche.

"Texas Rattler ain't captur'd, by a jug-full!" cried out the guide, in a confident and decided voice.

"How do you know this, Rocky?"

The colonel, in his misery, had not heard the sound.

"Dang bit! He's jist sent another red ter ther Injun kingdom-come, fer I heerd ther cuss gi'n his death yelp. The Rattler air on ther war-path, sure es shootin'; an' he's goin' ter resky Miss Pearl."

"I wish ter thunderation I know'd whar he air, but I opine he's up 'mong ther rocks, some shoots from hyer. Not fur, though, I reckon."

"This is terrible, most terrible!" exclaimed the ranchero, in a voice of bitter anguish and despair.

"I shall go mad if this fearful suspense does not soon end!"

"Thet 'u'd make ther chances o' reskyin' ther leetle gal more slimmer, 'coz yer'll flusterate me wuss'n p'ison ef yer doesn't keep yer brain-box on ther squar'."

"But, cuss my cats, ef I thort o' ther wagons et all! Curnil, 'low me ter smell 'roun' hyer, an' you skin back, an' run ther train inter ther open, back yunder; sockin' ther wagons cluss up tergether in a sorter corral, fer I'm inclernated ter opine we-uns hes gut a hefty fight ahead, ter save ther outfit."

"Skute lively! Er ther reds mought charge in on ther boyees, an' clean 'em out; strikin' 'em suddint-like, when they warn't thinkin'. Don't sling no gab, but member yer leetle boy air wi' ther train, an' he mought git tuck, tu. Yer can't do no good hyer, but I reckon I kin. Dang me, ef thar ain't Pearl's critter, an' yer must lead ther animile back 'cross ther drink!"

The words and manner of the old scout were impressive, and commanding; and, with a groan, his emotions deepened by the sight of his daughter's horse, which Old Rocky now led from a thicket, placing the neck-ropes in the colonel's hand, the latter offered no word of remonstrance; in fact, he saw at once that his only course was to obey the old scout, because delay might cause the capture and destruction of the train, and the loss of his son as well as his daughter.

Had there been the slightest way open for him to find out where Pearl was, and rescue her, the ranchero would undoubtedly have let the train take care of itself, and gone in search of his child. As it was, he recrossed the river, leading Pearl's horse, and soon disappeared in the undergrowth, leaving Old Rocky on the north bank, much relieved at having got rid of him.

Instantly the old scout secreted his horse, scalped the dead braves, muttering to himself meanwhile, and chewing his quid spitefully. Then he started up the gulch side, toward the point from which he believed the death-yell had been sounded, and which indicated the presence of the Texas Rattler, if not of Pearl Pemberton.

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE WAGON TRAIN.

LITTLE had poor Pearl dreamed, as she dashed gayly ahead of the train, that she was speeding toward horrors and perils that were destined to appall her very soul, and congeal the blood in her veins.

As she had galloped over the prairie toward that vast serpentine wall of dense verdure, the bottom-timber of the Rio San Saba, she little thought that, within the cool shades, lurked merciless savages, whose snake-like eyes peered out, flashing with exultation and a thirst for blood, from the bordering undergrowth toward her.

And, although she had greatly longed to meet the Texas Rattler on the San Saba, yet there was little expectation in her breast that she should be thus gratified.

Strange it was that, at the same time the ranger, from the opposite side of the river, was speeding toward the shades, with much of hope in his heart—hope that, ere a week should pass, he would again clasp his darling to his breast.

Thus it was, that all the people of the train from the easterly prairie, and the young ranger from the westerly, were fast approaching the timber beneath which all anticipated a pleasant night's rest and sleep; but which point was destined to prove the scene of horror, danger, and death!

Like an avalanche, had anguish, misery, and self-condemnation, fallen upon Colonel Pemberton; causing him to be nearly oblivious to his surroundings, his object, and his destination, after leaving Old Rocky, and fording the river.

Had the old scout thought it possible that there were any Indians between the ford and the margin of the timber, at which point the colonel would be within view of his train, he would not have sent his employer on the back trail, on any consideration; but this had seemed absurd, even had Old Rocky for an instant harbored the suspicion.

Nevertheless, the way was not entirely clear.

When the wagon train had first appeared in sight from the timber, it had been discovered from afar by the keen eyes of a Comanche brave; one of a small party, who had left their camp up the river a little distance, for the purpose of securing game in the bottom-timber, and fish from the river.

As soon as had been possible the red man had collected his comrades by signal, and all had agreed that without doubt the train would encamp at the very point where they themselves were stationed—that is, at the cove in the timber before mentioned.

As their horses were on the opposite side of the San Saba, this party of fourteen braves decided that they would remain and make sure of the exact position of the proposed camp of the whites, ascertain the number of their enemies,

and then steal through the timber up the river with their information.

Then the entire war-party could, under cover of the coming night, make their way across the ford, massacring the Texans, and securing scalps and booty.

Such had been the object of the Indians until they saw Pearl dash off alone, ahead of the train, and riding directly toward them.

Resolving that they would capture her and convey her to their chief, all of the braves stole stealthily to the ford, except two who remained to watch the wagon-train, and a third who hastened to the camp of the war-party with the information that has been mentioned.

The two braves left behind had been greatly amazed and not a little concerned when the sound of firearms had betrayed to them that white men were in their rear, who did not belong to the train, and who were desperately fighting with their comrades, who had gone to lie in wait for the white squaw.

These two skulkers were crouched within a few feet of the border of the thickets, past which dashed Old Rocky and Colonel Pemberton, going toward the ford; and, as soon after all sounds of conflict ceased, the painted pair became exceedingly anxious, being cut off from their camp and comrades. One of them decided to return to the ford and ascertain the result of the fight, while the other remained to watch the train.

The brave who started toward the ford, however, did not proceed beyond the border of the bushes on the inner portion of the cove, for he heard the approach of horses from the river.

Hastily choosing a favorable position, he awaited the approach of those who, he was well satisfied, were his foes; he having no idea of betraying his presence or assaulting them—satisfied that they would eventually be captured by his comrades.

The sounds were caused by the horses, one ridden and the other led by Colonel Pemberton, and no sooner did the lurking Comanche see that but one foe approached than he decided at once that he would return to his camp with the scalp of a hated white man in his belt.

It is probable that, had the ranchero been on the alert and ready for defense, the Indian would have permitted him to pass unmolested; but the form of the poor agonized man was bowed, and his gaze fixed in a meaningless stare at the neck of his horse—his face like that of a corpse.

From this the red lurker had reason to believe that his comrades were victors; that they had not only secured the white squaw, but that the old scout, so feared and hated by the Comanches—Old Rocky—whom he and his comrade had recognized, had been killed or captured.

As this probability flashed upon the mind of the Indian, he became confident and exultant.

The way was open for him to win a scalp, two horses, and the praise of his chief; and that, with no risk to himself whatever, as this old white man knew nothing of his presence. He would, however, make his fellow braves believe there had been a desperate hand to hand fight. He would, therefore, proceed with a view of leaving "sign" to this effect; intending to wound the colonel, and then jerk him from his saddle to the earth, holding him at his mercy, to torture and exult over him before giving him his death-wound.

Fitting an arrow to his bow-string, the hideous, paint-daubed Comanche braced himself, and stepped stealthily forward as the Texan's horse swerved somewhat from a straight course.

The next instant, the sharp twang of the Indian's bow sounded on the air, but it was preceded by the darting of some small animal from the bushes in which stood the savage, directly in front of the horse ridden by Colonel Pemberton.

With a terrified snort, the beast threw up its head, and reared on its hind legs, just in time to receive the deadly shaft in its neck.

With a human-like cry, the wounded animal bounded into the air, hurling the ranchero to the earth, and then shot forward toward the train; while the pony of Pearl, which had been led by her father, stampeded, crashing through the bushes in the direction of the ford, doubly frightened by the Comanche brave bounding in front of it upon his victim.

Colonel Pemberton, dazed as he was by the terrible emotions that ruled his brain, was quite unprepared for the catastrophe that had happened to him, and was doubtless ignorant of the presence of the Indian, or the wounding of his horse; for he was hurled to the earth in an instant, with violent force, striking his head against the trunk of a sapling, which bereft him of all sense.

This, as will be shown, proved to be very providential.

With his repulsive face contorted in triumph, and with a murderous thirst for blood, the Comanche sprang astride of his fallen foe, dropping his bow, and jerking his long scalping-knife. This he upraised over the breast of the senseless old man, but lowered it when he saw his victim was unconscious.

Thus sat the brave gazing into the face of the Texan, who appeared bereft of life; but well the Indian knew his victim would soon recover, and then he would have the satisfaction of gazing into the eyes of the doomed man, and enjoying the horror and terror there mirrored, as his knife, was held over the heart of his foe.

For a moment or two, so elated, and filled with exultant pride, was the warrior, that he did not consider the fact that the wounded horse had galloped toward the train, or that he was as yet ignorant of the result of the fight at the ford.

When this thought at length came to him, the Comanche began to see that he was in danger from the scout, Old Rocky, whom he could hardly bring himself to believe had been slain; it having been decided by the Comanches, that the old scout was protected by the Bad Spirit, and therefore bore a charmed life.

As the people of the train could not reach him for some time, and his comrade would warn him of their approach, the savage felt no apprehension from that source.

He hoped that his comrade had discovered the wounded horse, and would run to his assistance, thinking him in peril, thus giving him an opportunity to slay the white man before the very eyes of his envious comrade.

If the Texan should recover at the moment his comrade brave appeared, and he could then thrust his knife into his heart, while struggling as if in conflict, it would give him great renown as a warrior—this being his first war-path. Hoping that events would happen thus to favor him, and prove his prowess, the Indian waited patiently; his senses strained to catch any sound from either the direction of the plain, or the ford.

Thus it was that the lingering behind of two braves in the party of warriors was fated to bring about a chain of disastrous occurrences to our friends; plunging the colonel deeper into despair and anguish. But, to further explain.

When Colonel Pemberton and Old Rocky first reached the border of the timber, and heard the shrieks of Pearl, their sudden dash into the cove had been observed by the leading teamster of the wagon-train, and he had given a yell of warning to his comrades, at the same time whipping up his mules.

This alarmed all the teamsters, who urged their animals at full speed toward the river; the incessant cracking of "black-snakes," the outcries, and the increased speed of the mules that were attached to the Dearborn, awakening Paul Pemberton. The boy was greatly alarmed and concerned upon discovering the absence of his father and sister, as well as the guide, from the train. From the manner of the teamsters, also, Paul decided that something was wrong.

Clutching the reins and whip, the youth lashed the mules on, passing the wagon ahead, the teamster yelling to him as he did so:

"Somethin' wrong et ther timmer, Paul!"

At the same time, the lead-teamster turning and observing the boy, gesticulated wildly, pointing toward the place at which the colonel and the old scout had disappeared.

The cheeks of the youth paled, his face became expressive of great anxiety, and at the same time a strong determination. Then he lashed his mules at frantic speed, soon passing beyond the train; and, before many minutes, reaching the cove—his light-running, well-greased Dearborn making but little noise on the grassy sward.

At the very moment that Paul turned to enter the cove in the timber, out from the same galloped the horse of his father, the animal snorting and panting with pain and fright, its ears pricked forward, its eyes starting and wild in expression, while blood spouted at every bound from its neck, where the feathered shaft of an arrow was plainly to be seen.

Straight to the side of the Dearborn, dashed the wounded horse.

One glance at his father's beast caused Paul Pemberton to turn ghastly; and, clutching his rifle from the back of the vehicle, the youth, knowing at once that he could not pass through the timber with the Dearborn—besides instantly deciding that he might accomplish something, be of assistance to some of those who were in peril—he sprang to the earth, cocked his rifle, and darted toward the river, along the border of the undergrowth at the margin of the clear cove.

Having been so recently awakened from a sound slumber, to become instantly greatly alarmed in regard to the safety of his father and sister—and yet for his life, not being able to understand what could possibly be the nature of that danger; he, at the utmost of his imagination, believing it nothing more than that Pearl had been absent an unreasonably long time—the boy's horror may be guessed at, when he saw that his father's horse had been wounded by an Indian arrow.

Little thought had Paul that he was now being guided by Providence, directly to the spot where his father lay.

There, where we have left him, the Comanche was not obliged to wait but a short time, when he heard a sound, as of some one approaching from the plain.

Not for an instant did the red assassin entertain a thought that this was other than his comrade.

Colonel Pemberton writhed, and groaned aloud.

The sounds of approach grew nearer.

The Comanche raised his long knife, clutching the ranchero by the throat, and feigning to be struggling with him. A single glance he shot toward the new-comer, and started, on seeing a white youth, whose rifle was leveled, and aimed directly at his head.

The knife of the Comanche was raised, but at that very instant the sharp crack of the rifle rung out on the air, and the savage, with a horrible death-yell, threw up his arms, and sunk backward. Colonel Pemberton sprang to his feet, trembling with emotion and gratitude.

It was not his boy Paul merely, that the ranchero saw, however; for, just in the rear of the youth stood a hideous Comanche, with uplifted tomahawk, and as it descended, Paul fell prone upon his face. The next moment, the brave youth was clutched in the arms of the Comanche, who darted into the undergrowth with his captive; a low outcry of fiendish exultation bursting from his lips.

This was the sight which met the gaze of the colonel, and no wonder was it that the intensity of his anguish and hopeless despair, on account of the loss of both his dear ones, coupled with all he had suffered since the shrieks of Pearl first tortured his ears and heart—no wonder was it, that he fell senseless beside the corpse of his recent captor, who, but for the opportune arrival of Paul, would have slain him.

And brave young Paul Pemberton, in thus saving his father's, had sacrificed his own liberty, if not his life!

CHAPTER VIII.

BIG FOOT.

At the time of which we write, Big Foot, the Comanche chief, was a perfect terror. So many had been his marvelous escapes, at times when every brave in his war-party was slain, that, among the Texan Rangers he was known for years as the Phantom Chief. He was as cunning as a fox, and rode with his braves like a whirlwind, committing the most bloodthirsty massacres, and scattering death and desolation along the Texan border.

So successful was this chief in his raids, that it was considered a high honor by the warriors of his tribe to follow his leadership; hence he formed his war-parties without trouble, regardless of the large number slain by the rangers, when the latter were so fortunate as to pounce upon his camps, when his mustangs were fagged from their terrible runs, and he was forced in consequence to halt.

Big Foot, the Comanche, was therefore as much noted at one time as was Big Foot Wallace, the celebrated Texan scout, the latter being so well and favorably known that his name was a household word in the great South-West.

Both the red and the white mentioned gained their *sobriquets* from having pedal extremities considerably above the average size, even for men of powerful, not to say gigantic build.

The Comanche chief was a large and hideous Indian, who hated all whites with the intensity of a demon. He was merciless in character, delighting in torture, and ingenious in the conception and practice of the same, even upon defenseless women and helpless babes.

Such was the chief who was in command of the war-party on the Rio San Saba, the same arriving in the vicinity of the point described in a previous chapter about an hour before the wagon-train of Colonel Pemberton came slowly into view, on the southeast plain.

Rattler had not observed the Comanches, for the good reason that he was on the north side of the San Saba, while Big Foot was not only on the south side, but had kept his braves, cunningly, for some distance within the timber, in descending the stream: previously galloping close along the verge of the line of towering trees, where none but a skilled scout could have made them out, from the south prairie.

Within a natural "open," completely hidden from view, even a few yards from its border, supposing one was traveling in the shades, was the camp of the Comanches.

The open was of sufficient size to allow of the Indians staking their half-wild steeds around the outskirts; while, within the center, lay the red marauders, feasting upon half-cooked horse-meat.

No more fiendish scene could well be conceived of, than that same Comanche camp. Red scouts were sent down the river, and stationed on the border of the timber to the south. This precaution, luckily for our friend Rattler, was neglected on the north side, as the river flowed between the camp and the belt of timber on the opposite side.

After satisfying their ravenous appetites, the Indians in the camp threw themselves upon the sward to rest; their hideous faces upturned, and their half-naked forms repulsive in the decorations of the war-path.

Their peculiar saddles had not been removed

from the mustangs, the girth being but loosened, and jaw-straps slipped, all ready for immediate start; each brave prepared to resume arms, bound upon his steed, and dart from the camp; for well these red warriors of the Llanos knew that, at any moment, in that section, the yell from their hated and terrible foes, the Texan Rangers, might sound in their ears, and death thin their ranks.

Not until their spies returned, and reported, would they make themselves and their animals free, to rest for the coming night.

Reclining, his hideous hand resting upon his palm, and his elbow on the ground, was Big Foot, the paint-daubed torturer of the Llanos. His piercing eyes swept the camp, and his ears were sharpened to catch the slightest sound, while his right hand rested upon the handle of his long scalping-knife.

Upon the broad breast of the chief was the representation of a huge foot-print, in vermilion, surrounded by a line of black; while, from his neck, and hanging by a silver chain, over a collar of huge bear claws, was a silver crescent-shaped plate, the points reaching from one collar-bone to the other. This was engraved in many strange symbols and devices, the work, doubtless, of a Mexican captive.

Thus, for some time, the camp remained.

Not a word was spoken. Naught except the dull stamp of the horses, an occasional snort from one or more of the animals, the tearing of grass from the sod, and the champing of the jaws of the mustangs, were heard. More horrible appeared the bronzed braves, from their silence.

At once the strange scene changed. Out from the bordering thickets, through the belt of mustangs, that sprung aside with startled snorts, strode a Comanche brave. He proceeded in a direct line, looking neither to the right nor to the left, to the side of his chief. There he halted, erect as a forest pine, folding his arms across his painted breast. Thus he stood, waiting, Indian fashion, to be addressed by his superior.

Big Foot moved not from his recumbent position, merely turning his keen gaze up to the face of the brave; although he well knew that a discovery had been made, which either promised booty, scalps, and revenge, or would necessitate a headlong retreat from the camp to a safer resting-place.

Only for a moment did the chief remain silent, as if speculating in his mind the character of the news he was to hear; and the braves in the camp still lay as before, manifesting no change in any way, although every one had flashed a glance at the spy, their comrade, as the latter entered the camp.

"Do the birds fly, and the deer run to timber?" questioned the Comanche chief.

"Has Black Fox seen wolves steal through the bushes to the plain? Do coyotes raise their heads, and smell the air toward sun-come?"

"Has my red brother's keen eyes seen specks in the sky toward log-lodges of Texasos? Does he know that buzzards wait where clouds fly for our foes—that they are coming?"

"Has Black Fox seen white men's smoke? Let my red brother think of these things. Big Foot cares not to listen to song of birds. His ears are not open to squaw talk."

"Black Fox has on war-paint. Let him speak like a warrior!"

The questioning of the chief implied that, at some time, Black Fox, who was a young brave, had brought information of enemies to Big Foot, which information had proved to be incorrect. The answer of the spy proved that such was the case.

"Black Fox was blind when on first war-path," he returned, respectfully, and with not a little show of shame. "His eyes are now open. If his words are not true, he will put on squaw clothes, and sweep the lodge of an Apache."

"Black Fox has not seen buzzards. Coyotes stay in holes. Birds sing, for sun say good-by soon. Deer eat grass on plain. Bime-by come in bushes, for dark comes. But deer will not stay in bushes. Coyotes will not hunt sick buffalo when sun go. Birds will be scared from trees when sun go. Buzzards will fly over trees, and come in timber, when dark comes. Coyotes will gnaw bones when dark comes, but not bones of sick buffalo."

"Black Fox has a long tongue. He likes to sing songs," spoke up the chief, with a show of anger. "He should stay with squaws, and not go on war-path."

"Big Foot will cut off tongue quick, if his red brother speaks not what is in his heart."

The spy made no sign of fear. Just the opposite. He had an air and poise of evident pride, conscious that he could speak words which would at once banish all the anger of his chief, and gain him renown and praise.

But delay was dangerous.

Had there not been ample time ahead for all arrangements to be made in connection with the information he had to impart, he well knew that not to give an immediate answer would doom him to death. But his chief had opened a bitter wound in his breast, and it was worth risking death to reply in the same lengthy

strain, which was most provoking to the now impatient Big Foot.

The spy replied at once, when he saw the look in the chief's eye.

"Black Fox has said coyotes will gnaw bones when dark comes. His tongue is long, but it is not forked. Coyotes will gnaw the bones of Texasos. War-cries of Big Foot's braves will scare birds, scare deer in bushes."

"Black Fox has spoken straight. So many wheel-lodges where sun come on plain. Here before sun go."

The spy indicated the number of wagons in the train by extending his fingers.

Instantly Big Foot sprung to his feet, his eyes blazing with exultation, and gave a peculiar yell.

The warriors gathered quickly around their chief.

The information received was immediately explained in a few very impressive words. It was the proudest moment of Black Fox's life.

He was allowed to select the small party of young braves, who, in his command, leaving their horses in camp, proceeded down the river, for the purpose of capturing any stragglers from the train; but these young braves, as has been shown, soon came to grief through Rattler, the Ranger, Black Fox, however, and the brave who carried away Paul Pemberton, after the youth had slain the warrior who had been with him, survived the disasters at the ford.

Black Fox was the warrior in the cavern, who was stabbed by Rattler, and his further movements remain to be recorded; for, although he fell, apparently dead, enough of life remained in his body to enable him later on to work out greater misery, and in a strange manner.

CHAPTER IX.

THE ATTACK ON THE TRAIN.

At the time of Paul Pemberton's capture, and the mad charge of Rattler upon the Comanches, the main war-party were making ready for leaving their camp; intending to proceed down the river, and attack the wagon-train in the silence of the coming night.

The reports of the young ranger's revolvers were, however, heard, as the sounds were borne up the river, echoing beneath the archway of the trees, below which flowed the stream, there being but few places where the limbs from the trees on one side did not mingle with those on the other, forming, with the vines and Spanish moss, a perfect network of verdure.

The exceptions were where the cliffs, so rugged, broken and scarred, formed the northern bank as described, and where Rattler and Pearl would have met from opposite directions, had not the thickets been filled with young braves under Black Fox.

Big Foot and his warriors felt assured that these latter had met with strong resistance, but none thought of what had really happened, or that there would be a failure of the object of their young comrades.

The chief, however, was furious to think that the young braves had so bungled their work as to allow the shooting, which would be certain to alarm, or warn those with the wagon-train of danger near at hand. He had already been informed of the fact that two white men and a woman were far in advance of the train, and he judged that they were on the lookout for a suitable place for camping, and that while thus engaged they had been attacked by his young braves, after the whites had gained the timber.

The revolver-shots would now alarm the teamsters, and cause them to prepare for defense, thus making the attack more dangerous to the war-party, who would doubtless be reduced in strength. But the charge, Big Foot decided, must be made in order to give him and his braves the entire night in which to retreat, with their booty and captives, to a place of safety.

Consequently the hideous horde sprung on their mustangs, and as silently as was possible, glided through the dense shades of the timber, down the stream.

When the teamsters of the wagon-train whipped up their mules, and Paul Pemberton, after being warned that something was wrong with his sister and father, started off also, they could get but moderate speed from their animals after the first short spurt; for the wagons were heavily loaded and the mules sadly fatigued. In consequence of this, some length of time elapsed before Bud Blossom, the wagon-master, who drove the lead team, reached a point from which he could command a view of the outer portion of the timber cove.

Previously they had all seen the horse of Colonel Pemberton gallop madly from the cove, straight out upon the plain, where the animal fell to the earth, as if suddenly stricken with death; but they did not recognize the beast, the dazzling sunset preventing them.

Yet this added to their alarm, and increased their bewilderment as to what was transpiring ahead.

When Bud Blossom reached a point commanding a limited view of the cove, to his utmost astonishment and apprehension, he perceived the

ambulance and mules driven within it, the animals standing listless, as they were checked up, and unable to feed, and fatigue was strong upon them. It was strange, however, that the beasts had not proceeded toward the river to slake their thirst, although they would perhaps have been unable to reach the stream through the trees and undergrowth.

The fact was, that the mules had been prevented from so doing, as a wheel had caught on a sapling stump.

The teamsters were perplexed and concerned, as well as considerably ignorant of the terrible experiences of those who had preceded them on horseback.

As Paul had been captured, and borne away, and his father had been rendered senseless by the accumulation of misery and anguish which had suddenly overwhelmed him; both Rattler—of whose presence the teamsters knew nothing—and Pearl, being in the cavern of horrors on the north side of the river; this state of affairs left them without any knowledge of the threatened dangers.

Bud Blossom led the train into the timber cove, which was some five acres in extent, and circled, as was customary on the border, the wagons in corral.

The mules were quickly unharnessed, and, after rolling in the grass, cantered off eagerly to the river to drink, almost in a body. Bud detailed two of the men to take charge of the herd, and also to inspect the surroundings between the wagon-camp and the river, and also at the stream, for the missing ones.

He dared not leave the valuable train, to make a personal search; and so, prudently set about making the wagon-fort as secure as was possible, besides supplying a sufficiency of ammunition and carbines to his fellows. This was before any preparations were made toward the evening meal, for the wagon-master felt, upon deliberation, that naught except danger to the train could explain the mysterious disappearance of the owner, his children, and the guide.

This impression was the more strongly forced upon Bud's mind, through the absence of the latter, who was so conversant with frontier peril.

As it happened, however, the mules were driven back from the ford, without the pair of herders having discovered any trace of the parties, whose absence was so unaccountable.

The corpse of the Comanche, slain by Paul, was hidden from view in the thicket, and besides the mules had not passed within some distance of the scene.

Quiet reigned around the wagon-camp, broken only by the movements of the mules, which were allowed to graze in the space between the camp and the river.

Not until the two herders returned, and reported, did Bud order supper to be prepared—a supper that the teamsters were doomed never to eat, and which was fated to be cooked rather more than usual—in fact, to be burnt to ashes.

Perhaps ten minutes passed after Bud's order, and then a yell shot from the wagon-master's lips—a yell of strange intonation, and expressive of warning, astonishment, concern—that caused every Texan to bound for his rifle, and stand ready to defend their lives, and their employer's property under their charge.

This was caused by a discovery most horrible.

The lurid sunlight enveloped the outer plain, in a strange haze seldom seen except in the latitude of which we write; the blood-red orb of day shooting its last lingering rays, in arrows and bars of fiery light, through the branches and foliage of the trees.

But, as the wagon-master yelled, and all gazed toward the point mentioned, as they clutched their weapons in expectation of danger, a sight met their view that—border "mule-whackers" as they were—caused the very blood in their veins to chill, and their hearts, for the moment, to cease beating. And during that moment, their ears were tortured by such hellish and deafening whoops as few mortals are ever called upon to hear—the war-cries of full fifty blood-maddened Comanche braves!

Around that beautifully illumined corner of the cove bounded the red marauders, the sunlight glittering upon their lance-points. Every brave held bow in hand, and the deadly arrow fitted to string; bows that a white man could not bend one-fifth the necessary curve to send an arrow effectually—bows as destructive and deadly at fifty yards as a rifle, and from which the owner could pierce a buffalo through and through, which the best of rifles fail to do with a bullet.

On thundered the avalanche of savages, their wild war-whoops filling the air, their long hair flying in the wind of their terrific speed, their half-wild mustangs snorting and bounding in mad plunges of fright and pain, as the hissing quirts cut their hams, the bows and arrows being held in their left hands, ready for use on the instant.

On, with the rush of a "norther," through the rank grass and flowers; sending showers of the same broken and hurled afar by the fast-flying hoofs.

Still on, their snaky eyes flashing hate and a thirst for blood, the war-spirit worked up to

frantic frenzy by the sight of their enemies. Exultant with a certainty in their minds of scalps, victims for the torture, and much plunder—the startled herd of mules, which became one grand whirlpool of brutes, to the north of the wagon fort, first meeting their covetous view.

It was a sight to appall the stoutest heart, and to banish hope from the little band of Texans; but after the first shock of bewilderment, they sprung to the best positions, and braced themselves for fight to the death.

Indeed there was no alternative, no retreat, as the affrighted herd of mules was between them and the river, and before any could pass the intervening space on either side the red demons would ride them down.

"Give 'em lead, boyees, afore ther red cantankerous cusses pull strings! Keep poppin'—give bit tu them ontily yer drap!"

"Jump inter ther powder-wagon an' blow up ther hull caboodle, we-uns counted in, er they'll scoop us fer tortur', ef they snatches us!"

These, and other yells of like character came from the teamsters, who well knew they were doomed to death and torture, and preferred the former; but they were resolved to make the red raiders pay dearly for their victory.

Instantly the reds ceased using their quirts, and half-bent their bows; when out from between and beneath the wagons hurtled the leaden messengers of death among the red raiders, causing horrible death-hoofs and vengeful whoops, as the braves, with bows clutched in the death-spasm, threw up their arms and fell over the hams of their mustangs, to be trampled and crushed in their dying moments by the fast-flying hoofs in their rear, while riderless steeds, with snorts and plunges of terror, added to the terrific confusion among the red horde.

Then came a cloud of arrows into and between the wagons; flight after flight of deadly shafts in quick succession, while louder and wilder rung the war-whoops and a continuous spurt of flame and lead issued from the wagon-fort, as the teamsters dropped rifles and took up their revolvers.

Such a pandemonium as ruled in that timber cove it is impossible to approach in description; the mules and extra stock of Colonel Pemberton, fully a hundred animals—many of them being wounded by flying arrows—rushed madly in a wild stampede, crashing through the undergrowth toward the ford, where but a short time previously they had drank peacefully of the clear, rippling waters.

Such a mad charge as that of the Comanches was simply irresistible, notwithstanding a full score of death-yells had burst from red throats.

And, amid the din of savage fight, loud rung the yells, and whoops, and signal-shouts, of Big Foot; who, although in the van, remained unhurt.

Had it not been that the wagons formed an impassable barrier, the band of Texans would not have remained alive two minutes; but Big Foot knew beforehand the difficulties he would be forced to contend with, and as the hideous horde charged over their fallen dead and dying, reaching the wagons, a score of braves, with scalping knives in their hands, sprung from their mustangs, and cast themselves headlong between and under the wagons.

This was at the moment that the gallant Texans had fired every shot, and they had no time to reload. They could only jerk bowies, and there were but three of them able to do this. The others lay, stark and stiff, feathered shafts protruding from their corpses.

So quickly was this maneuver executed by the savages, others urging on their mustangs to cut off all retreat, and still others lashing their animals after the stampede, mingled with them being many of the beasts from which the riders had been shot, that it was grand in itself. Terribly grand was it to see the three heroic survivors of the train's defenders, standing together, shoulder to shoulder; their bowies clutched, their eyes glaring from their pale faces, and they panting with exertion.

Even then, in that terrible moment, they were encouraging each other to die fighting; and not to be captured alive, to be tortured by the red demons.

At that very moment, one of the brave Texans thought of the words of his pard, then dead; and he dashed madly to the camp-fire, grasping a brand, and rushing to the ammunition wagon, he cast in the blazing stick. The same instant, he was knocked senseless, and was bound by a red foe, as had been both his comrades; a half-dozen lasso nooses that had encircled them, having prevented their fighting, as they had purposed, to the death.

The Indians had determined to capture them alive, and they had succeeded in doing so.

The captives were hurled roughly to the ground, and loud rung the yell of victory from the dismounted braves, to be followed, like an echo, by a tremendous explosion, as the ammunition wagon blew up!

Big Foot had won the victory, but at a fearful cost; for many warriors, who happened to be near the wagon, were buried instantly to the earth, while the three captives escaped harm, having been thrown to the ground when bound.

CHAPTER X.

LOITERING BY THE WAY.

"DANG an' double dang everything an' every-buddy, 'speshly ther copper-color'd kiotes, ther cantankerous, cavortin', condemned cusses!"

Thus Old Rocky expressed himself, in low but emphatic soliloquy; ejecting spitefully copious squirts of tobacco juice, as he stole up the cliff-side, after leaving his horse, and observing that Colonel Pemberton had, with his own and the horse of Pearl, crossed the ford in safety. He had feared that the ranchero, who appeared demoted with anguish and self-condemnation at the capture of his daughter by the merciless savages, would cast himself from his horse into the river, in pure desperation at being forced to abandon the search for Pearl, and to look to the safety of Paul and the train.

The old scout was in a most perplexed state of mind, and had torn off a fresh chew of "nigger head" at the base of the cliff; for well he knew that a large force of Indians must be somewhere in the vicinity.

This, he had several reasons for knowing.

First, the braves who had been slain had evidently been waiting at the ford to capture Pearl Pemberton, having observed her riding toward the cove, on the open plain, from their covert in the timber.

Secondly, their horses were not near at hand, as no "sign" showed this on either side of the stream; and besides, the Indians would not have taken to the cliffs, as they evidently had done, were their animals near at hand.

Thirdly, he knew that the slain Indians were young braves, fresh on the war-path, and sent out from the main party for the purpose of discovering enemies; thus affording them an opportunity of distinguishing themselves.

Several reasonable conclusions Old Rocky arrived at.

He knew that the young braves would not dare harm Pearl—that she would be safe until they joined the main war-party—for her captors, vain of their achievement, would deliver her to their chief.

Wonderful was it, the old scout considered, that Rattler, the Ranger, had reached the ford in the very nick of time, to take a hand in avenging the young girl's capture; if, indeed, he had not witnessed it, and had only been prevented from tearing her from the red raiders, by a number of them engaging with him in fight, while others got away with the maiden.

All "sign" at the scene of conflict pointed to this conclusion, almost to a certainty.

From the fact that the reds were young and inexperienced braves, Old Rocky was convinced that they were not very strong in number, and that Rattler would effect the release of Pearl; for the old scout knew that the ranger would use every means in his power to carry out his purpose, and would not leave the trail until he accomplished it.

Yet, the old borderman felt that the capture of the maiden was not the only thing that would occur; for, doubtless, the main war-party would be informed of the approach of the wagon-train, if they did not already know it. On this account, Old Rocky was a greatly perplexed man; for Rattler might stand in great need of assistance in regaining Pearl, and the wagon-train might be in immediate danger.

Certainly Colonel Pemberton had been soon called upon to regret, from his inmost soul; that he had not listened to the advice of his friends, and not advanced with his children and belongings into a section where they would be torn from him, and his darling ones dragged to a fearful doom.

It was too late now, however, to remedy the evil, and the old scout's heart was filled with sorrow and sympathy for the Pemberton family, he having little ground for hope as to there being an opening to return down-country, even should Pearl be rescued.

These thoughts and conclusions flashed rapidly into Old Rocky's mind, as he scrambled up the crag-side, he holding his rifle ready, and his keen eyes not only scanning the way on every side for "sign," but all the surroundings for lurking enemies.

"Cuss my cats, an' catermounts, an' tiger-cats, an' all ther kittens counted inter ther programme! I'm gittin' wuss an' wuss worritated—fac' air, I'm ornighly nigh lunified wi' ther way things hev panned out all ter onc't. Hellishness hev bin slung ont'er the outfit jest es soon es we-uns struck ther San Saba, an' thar's a hefty 'mount more ready ter be heerd from, er I'm a baldheaded perrarer pervaricator."

"Ther curnil air a cantankerous, headstrong ole coon. He's wuss 'n a goverment mule what's hed free range fer a bull moon. Chaw my years off, an' kick off my knee-pans, ef I ain't sick 'nough ter puke up my toe-nails wi' pure mad, an' ginerwine hyderphobic indig'! Think o' 'lowin' ther outfit ter perceed! I'd orter lassoed ther ole man, slung him inter a wagon, an' p'inted back ag'in, fer I smelled cussedness, an' so did my nag!"

"I felt mighty bilious, an' now I knows my ole hoss war puttin' on ther big limp biz, makin' b'lieve he c'u'dn't naver gate on 'count o' not

wantin' ter go any furdur wi' ther leetle gal in ther outfit.

"Fur es me an' ther critter's consarned, we-uns er Rattler would lunge right on inter b'iled-down prussic acid bilious biz, an' feel peart all ther time, though the perrarer war chuck-full o' ha'r-slathers, an' yer c'u'dn't hear a boss norther in ther timmer fer ther heathun yelps. Dod—"

The soliloquy of Old Rocky was brought to a close for the time by the report of Paul's rifle, when the latter shot the Indian who was astride of his father and about to plunge his scalping-knife in the ranchero's heart.

The report was not loud, but it echoed in the arches of the timber, and the practiced ears of the old scout knew it was from Paul's small-bore rifle.

At this time our old friend was high up on the cliff-side, in a rough and rocky seam, beside a huge boulder; in fact he was but a few paces from the rock-shelf along which Rattler had hastened after Pearl and her captors, and which led to the cavern that now reeked with slain and senseless beings.

Had the scout known of this—had he known he was so near to the ranger and the maiden, and how sadly they needed his aid, he would have sped along the dangerous shelf with not a thought of his steps or of the deep cavern which might be his grave did he make but one false footing.

But, ignorant of all this, he sunk to a sitting posture beside the boulder, and ejecting a squirt of tobacco-juice, with great disgust imprinted upon his face, he again began his grumbling.

"Waal, dog-gone an' double dod-gast this dangnation double-distilled disgustin' deestric! Everythin's goin' dead ag'in' we-uns, er I'm a-bopin' ter be nibbled ter death by dipper-ducks, an' then devoured by 'gator gars!"

"Thar's ther leetle boyee's shooter, without a flicker o' doubt; an' ef hit didn't spit fire, a-tween the ford an' ther "open," I'll chaw bugs fer grub the nex' six moons!"

"Ther ole man must ha' gut ter ther leetle locate, an' es I doesn't b'lieve ther Paul 'ud shoot his dad, I'm mixeder an' mixeder. Ther Ole Boy's ter pay, an' no pitch hot; but ef ther reds doesn't hear ther pop-gun, an' make hit hot fer ther hull outfit, I'll swaller a plug o' nigger-head eendways without drinkin'."

"What in thunderation an' dangnation's goin' ter pop out nex'? Talk o' bein' s'prised! I'm clean clerflusterated, an' feels a crawlin' et ther ruts o' my ha'r. Ef I didn't know ther curnil'd go plum off ther handle et secin' me glide inter ther outfit without Pearl, I'd skute back ag'in, an' kinder fix things fer ther red hellyuns."

"Bugs is buzzin' in my years, but thar ben't no bugs thar. Thet's a sign o' war-whoops, an' sculps, an' tortur' on ther half-shell! I wish't my nag war hyer. I'm lonesome on the trail without him, but he'd be 'bleeged ter waltz up on his years an' thet 'ud give him ramps in the hind kickers."

"I c'u'd chaw a b'iled owl without singin' off ther pin-feathers, fer I've gut a ole he hungry ont'er me! But I'd rather take a hand et chawin' up red hellyuns, an' yankin' ha'r an' feathers off'm thar painted heads. I reckon ther greasy dog eaters know'd I war round, er they wouldn't ba' tuck ter ther rocks, whar I'm like a lost pappoose on ther staked plains, fur es 'gards nosin' fer trails hyeraways, though I ginerly snatches things bald-headed on ther perrarers, an' ain't counted slow in ther bush."

There was no need for Old Rocky to express himself in this way, for any one who knew him and saw him as he was thus situated, and watched his features and actions would have known he was out of his element, in place and feelings; and especially as his horse was not within view.

Horse and man were almost inseparable companions.

A perfect terror in a fight, quick as a panther, and cunning and skilled in wood and prairie craft, was the old scout; but, as he admitted to himself, he felt lost in these rough, creggy and deep-rent rocks.

For a long time he sat thus, hoping to hear some sound, near or far, that would point toward the locating of Rattler, but none met his ear.

Neither did he hear any indications of Indians being near the river, or sounds from the wagon-train; but he did not expect that the wagon-master would quicken his speed, after knowing, through the colonel, that both Rattler and himself were on the trail of the abductors.

He felt much shame and self-condemnation, at the thought that he had not pressed forward in search of Pearl, though it seemed to him an impossibility to trace the missing maiden.

But the strange occurrences thus far were destined to be put far back in the shade—all, that is, that had come under the knowledge of the old scout—indeed, had he known what had transpired at the cavern, a short distance from where he then was, and that which had happened to the colonel and Paul, he would have been dumfounded, instead of what he termed "lunified and worritated."

Suddenly Old Rocky became aware of the presence of a moving object in the huge rocky rent in which he was.

He was conscious of some crawling thing being near him—something that was dragging over the stones like a serpent—and soon he located the sounds.

They came from the rear of the bowlder, beside which he sat; and he stole stealthily around the same, peeping up the gorge-like rent in the range.

Even the old scout, so long accustomed to strange, and startling, and bloody scenes, stared in open mouthed amazement, more from the strange and unaccountable presence of a human being in such a condition, and in such a place, than from the horrible state of the object itself, which bore but a faint resemblance to humanity, especially in the position in which it now advanced.

It was an Indian brave, in war-paint; but little of paint or skin was visible, all being covered with blood. His long hair was bedraggled and tangled, his leggins were torn by the rocks, and he crawled slowly and tremblingly along the rocky bed of the gulch; his head bowed, and his gaze—if indeed his eyes were open—fixed upon the rocks, over which he made his slow and painful way.

A more horrid and wretched-looking object could not well be imagined.

It was plain, from the vermilioned head of the savage, half of the same being clear of hair, that he was a Comanche.

This Old Rocky well knew, as well as by other plain paint marks.

The old scout knew more than this.

This was one of Big Foot's marauders.

If any doubts remained in Old Rocky's mind, in regard to there being a war-party near at hand, they were removed at once.

He knew that the red raiders of the Comanche chief were in the vicinity, and that the train was in great danger.

Still more than this he knew, and that was, that one of the abductors of Pearl Pemberton was before him—a victim to the knife of Raybold, the Ranger!

These two conclusions perfectly dumfounded the old scout, for the reason that it was his duty at once to return, and warn the people of the train to prepare for defense, or death would come to all!

The sun was half below the horizon line, and it would be useless now to search for Raybold and Pearl—who, if the latter had been rescued, were now safe—while the train was in great peril.

He would finish the Indian—put him out of misery—and then rush over the plain.

Thus Old Rocky decided, and clutched his knife; but, at that very instant, loud echoing through the timber beyond the river, rung the awful war-whoops of the Comanches!

For a moment, the old scout paused, trembling, and then cried out:

"Great Master, forgive Old Rocky for hangin' 'round hyer, when yer warned me thet hellishness war in ther air 'round San Saba!"

Thinking not again of the wounded Indian, the old scout rushed madly, at the risk of life and limb, down the rough cliff-side, in search of his horse.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HORRORS OF THE CAVE.

WE will now return to the ranchero, whom we left senseless, near to the corpse of the Comanche who had felled him. For a long time the colonel was happily oblivious to the overwhelming misery which had reached its climax when he saw the Indian strike his son to the earth, at the very moment that the brave boy had saved his father's life.

He had been paralyzed by his own nearness to death, and the shooting of his would-be murderer, and then upon recognizing his son as his preserver.

Powerless to move a limb, he had seen Paul stricken down by a red raider; and then, when the Indian had clutched the senseless youth and disappeared in the undergrowth, utterly overwhelmed, and believing himself forsaken of Heaven, he fell senseless with a heart-rending groan.

Certainly the cross was a heavy one for even a strong man to bear.

Both his darlings, all he had on earth to love, gone—and to a death too horrible to even think of.

He was now left alone in the world, and through his own stubbornness, by not heeding the advice of those who knew better than he the dangers on the San Saba. Not until just before the arrival of the train at the cave, did Colonel Pemberton revive, heavy groans marking his recovery.

He opened his eyes, saw the arch of verdure overhead, and realized that he lay upon the ground. Then, in the utmost bewilderment, he sprang to a sitting posture and gazed wildly upon his surroundings, but not comprehending his position, condition, or the events just past.

And not until he saw the hideous paint-daubed brave near him—did the truth—the awful truth—dawn upon him!

Then, not a sound left his pallid lips, as he arose and stood erect, but stiffly.

His eyes were glassy, and set with a strange and unnatural stare; his teeth were clinched tightly, and his features drawn with an agony of soul that was painful to witness.

Looking neither to the right nor to the left, he strode toward the river at the same point where he had crossed and recrossed. Soon he reached the bank and without hesitation walked directly into the waters, and waded across in the same unnatural manner.

Reaching the opposite bank, he halted where the hoof-prints of Pearl's horse, which he so well knew, had left plain trail in the soft earth.

Here he threw himself upon the ground, and the tears streamed from his eyes, thus giving vent to his anguish of soul.

In a moment he arose erect, raising his eyes and clinched hand skyward; then, in a strange and unnatural, deep and hoarse voice, and filled with the concentrated agony within him, he cried out:

"Give me back, oh, give me back my lost darlings! Let not those red fiends tear them from my very heart and soul! Nerve my brain and arm, oh, merciful Heaven, to rescue or avenge my children, or else lead me on to death!"

After this impassioned supplication, the colonel resumed his former strange look and manner, as if the terrible load that had momentarily been removed, had again fallen upon him.

He strode directly to the spot where Old Rocky had left his faithful steed—a horse without which the old scout was almost literally lost.

Loosing the neck-rope from the tree, Colonel Pemberton vaulted into the saddle, and turned the beast toward and into the ford. Soon he reached the south bank again, when he spurred up the river and through the undergrowth, at the greatest speed possible under the circumstances of the situation.

Evidently the colonel had, by his great agony of mind, conceived the idea that the Indian, who had dashed up the river with Paul, was one of the party who had captured Pearl, and that he would join that party which had crossed the stream, leaving the ranger and the old scout to blunder about the cliffs on the north bank.

Colonel Pemberton, although reasoning plausibly, was none the less a madman. His only aim was to rescue his children or to avenge them, and in the attempt probably make sure of his own death, thus relieving the terrible torture that now turned his brain seemingly to seething molten lead.

He came to the conclusion that the camp of the red foe was up the river, that there he would find his darlings, and there he would go!

We will thus leave him on this mad gallop, tearing through the undergrowth and tearing himself by the wild rush through the thickets. All thoughts of the wagon-train and his friends were banished from his mind. He had but one set purpose.

Long lay both Rattler and Pearl in the cave, as devoid of all life, seemingly, as the corpses beside them. The first of all to show evidence of recovery, which became to all appearance but partial, was Black Fox—the young brave who had carried intelligence in regard to the coming of the train to Big Foot, and who had been honored, most unhappily for himself and others under him, by being sent to capture the stragglers from the wagon-train.

The torch of resinous pine still burned in the inner cave-chamber, where lay the beautiful Pearl Pemberton beside the blood and paint-smeared Comanche, whom the hand of death had prevented from strangling the fair maiden.

Pearl lay with hands clasped, her face the pallor of death and her lips apart showing her small, pearly teeth. The expression on her face seemed to denote that a partial consciousness had for a time returned to her, but now all was again oblivion.

A horrible scene was that cave in the sickly light of the torch, the flame of which flared, its light becoming now bright and now dim, playing upon the pools of blood and on the ghastly and soulless eyes of the prostrate Comanche braves.

Outside, in the winding passage, a partial darkness prevailed, the light from the entrance being dim on account of the windings and blending with that of the torch. There lay Rattler, the Ranger, his head bruised and gore-stained from the blow of the tomahawk, and his face appearing more pallid from contrast with the blood.

His three victims lay but a short distance from him, in the darker portion of the passage; the fourth being near Pearl, as described.

But one of these braves, who had fought like a panther, was now, as has been said, showing signs of recovery.

This was Black Fox, whose desire for the eagle-feathers of a warrior, and for renown and honor in his tribe, was the ruling passion of his life; and he seemed now to combat death with unnatural and superhuman strength of will, for

a terrible wound was in his painted breast, and the pool of blood by his side appeared as though it must contain all the life-current of his frame.

Cat-like in tenacity of life seemed Black Fox.

His limbs twitched spasmodically, his eyes gave evidence of some slight working of the mind, and his lips moved.

But a few moments thus; then he squirmed and writhed, serpent-like, and raised himself to a sitting posture by the aid of his arms, slowly and painfully, but no groan manifested the agony he must have suffered.

The fortitude to which he had been schooled was not forgotten, even in his half-conscious state, and when the deathlike silence which ruled the cavern must have caused him to think himself alone.

His body, bent forward with weakness, was upheld only by the bracing of his trembling arms; while down his breast, from his gaping wound, still ran tiny streams of blood.

Neither to one side nor the other gazed Black Fox; his lusterless eyes being fixed upon the pool of his own gore, as he had writhed beyond his former position. Gazing on that blood, there came from his lips, in low and strange guttural tones, a monotonous chant—his death-song—sounding weird and unearthly in the cavern.

It was evident that Black Fox retained sufficient reasoning powers to decide that he was still upon earth; that his spirit had not flown, but it soon must start on the long dark trail.

Little of prowess, or deeds of war—and these make up the death-song of a brave—had the young Comanche to recount; and this seemed to strike and fire him with the thought that he had, as yet, not a scalp to pass him within the portals of the happy hunting-grounds.

Bracing up for the first time, he gazed around him, and only after some moments did he show evidences that his sight still remained. Then his eyes glittered with an approach to the old luster, a demoniac and triumphant expression was shown upon his brutal blood-stained face; while, from his lips, in a superhuman effort to throw all his strength into an attempt at a natural volume of articulation, burst the war-whoop of his tribe, in horrible intonation.

The eyes of Black Fox had fastened upon the outstretched form of Rattler, the Ranger; and instantly the Comanche became endued with enough remaining life and strength, to get upon his hands and knees, and crawl to the side of his fallen foe.

Here was a scalp—the scalp of a noted enemy—a prize, a trophy, that would make an item in his death-song, and pass him beyond the moon, to the bright and wide valley, where the grass is ever green, the rivers never run dry, game is plentiful, and where mustangs are as fleet as the wind!

But his attempt proved futile. Black Fox could not sustain himself in a sitting posture, without the use of both arms to brace him; and this gave him no chance to use his knife, which now fell from his nerveless hand.

Then he lay down, and strove to tear the scalp from the head of the young ranger, clutching his hair with one hand, and circling his knife with the other; but the point of the blade only described serrated circles in the air, and finally fell with a clang on the further side of the senseless Texan.

At this moment, a low moan sounded from the cave-chamber. It was poor Pearl Pemberton; and with every effort that he could command, Black Fox worked himself around on the other side of Rattler, placed his feet against the ranger's body, and bracing himself, rolled it into the deeper darkness, away from the entrance.

The Comanche evidently expected to gain strength sufficient to scalp his enemy, after a little lapse of time; and he feared, by the groan, that there was some one in the cave-chamber who would deprive him of the coveted trophy.

The effort forced the wounded brave to remain quiet for a few moments. Then he regained his knife, placed the blade between his teeth, and crawled to the entrance of the cave-chamber.

But while this was transpiring, we must see what was going on within the cavern.

The low moan which the Comanche had heard was the first indication of the return to consciousness of the much-wronged Pearl of the Prairie. She opened her eyes, and the rough rock roof of the cave met her view, illumined by the flickering torch.

Not a vestige of color was in the fair girl's face, her clothing was torn, and her wealth of silky hair disheveled. Thus she presented a picture that would have melted a heart of flint.

Shuddering with horror at the sights that surrounded her, Pearl grasped the torch, and stepped forward toward the arched entrance.

A pool of blood lay before her, but the young ranger was nowhere to be seen!

At once she resolved that she would find a way out of the cave, into the light of Heaven. She need not seek for Rattler, for all search would be in vain. He had not left the cavern in life. He would never have deserted her. He

had been dragged out by savages, and they would return for her.

As this thought came home to the poor girl, she stepped forward, only to be almost paralyzed with the sight before her. Black Fox, the Comanche, approached, swaying and trembling, his eyes filled with gloating exultation.

Slowly this horrible object moved toward her, and yet Pearl could not move. Her breath came and went in short gasps; and, not until then, the loathsome Indian endeavored to sustain himself by one hand, and grasp his knife in the other.

Not until then did poor Pearl, with a piercing shriek of terror, turn and run to the further corner of the cave-chamber. There, to her relief, she discovered a branching passage, which led to some other cave. Here was a respite at least.

The maiden turned, gazing backward, and saw, to her great relief, that the Comanche had sunk on the floor of the cavern, and could not see her. All that had kept her from falling into a swoon, was the belief that the savages would return and seize her if she remained. Now, a way of escape was open.

Thankful for the strength to flee, and still retaining the torch, Pearl Pemberton tottered into the dark passage, and thus on, into the bowels of the honey-combed cliffs of San Saba—going, she knew not whither, but death was to be preferred to the horrors of that corpse-strewn cavern!

CHAPTER XII.

MEETING AND PARTING.

NOT more than five minutes after the disappearance of Pearl Pemberton from the cave-chamber, Black Fox again revived, and, seeming to have forgotten the vision of the white maiden, and also that his enemy, to whom he owed his death-wound and the death of his fellow-braves, lay at his mercy, he crawled from the cavern, along the ledge, and into the gorge; where he was discovered by Old Rocky, as has been described. For, the horrible object, which the old scout saw from around the boulder, was none other than Black Fox, the Comanche spy; whose life, what little remained to him, hung upon a thread.

The war-cries of the Comanche force under Big Foot had been the means of Old Rocky's leaving the miserable wretch with the remnant of life in him.

When those wild whoops of war, so loud and terrific, rung and echoed through timber and gulch, and cleft and cavern, the sound seemed to pierce the consciousness and revive the brain of Rattler, the Ranger, benumbed as it had been by the blow of the Indian's tomahawk.

Rattler sprung at once to his feet, pressing his head with his hands; then, as the same were moist, he gazed at them, although in the darkness he could not distinguish even the hand before him. Bewildered, he felt around him, and his hand came in contact with the rock wall.

Then, in an instant, the near past flashed upon him. He remembered his terrible knife-conflict with the four braves, the shriek of his darling, and her loved form against the wall of the cavern. He recalled her face, pale and drawn in anguish, as shown in the glare of the torch. It was a weird picture, that would be forever photographed upon his brain.

Where was that lighted torch?

Where was Pearl Pemberton?

"Oh, my God! My God, preserve her!"

Thus he cried out, as he recalled the fact that one Indian remained alive—one, who had stricken him senseless to the floor, at the very moment that his knife had been driven into the painted breast.

Had that knife pierced a mortal part?

The absence of the torch indicated the contrary.

His mental question was thus answered in the negative.

Electric-like came these thoughts, torturing and searing his brain. Then he cried out—oh, so earnestly, so wistfully, so prayerfully—

"Pearl! Pearl! For God's sake speak to me!"

But silence ruled the cavern—a silence almost to be felt.

With a gasping cry of anguish and despair, Rattler quickly caught at his tinder-box. All this was in a moment's time.

Then again rung the terrific whoops of war—sounds that had not been distinguished as he recovered, they having first pierced his brain as the horde of Big Foot came in view of the wagon-fort, and last as the Comanches, in full charge, with bows in hand, dashed down upon the doomed teamsters.

"Oh, Great God!"

With this single ejaculation, the young ranger felt along the wall, bruising his hand, groping his way to the open air. Then, half-insane, he returned, struck a light, and sprung into the cave-chamber; holding a blazing piece of buckskin, which, when long greased, burns brightly.

One glance showed him the dead brave, in the very spot where he had last seen Pearl.

But Pearl was not there!

Dashing out of the chamber, he discovered the corpse of but one of the red raiders.

Where was the other?

Where was Pearl Pemberton?

He felt that to answer one of these questions would be answering both, and he groaned aloud in his agony.

The sounds of battle now filled his ears, rifle-shots and fierce yells, and then the rattling fusillades of revolvers; and he rushed like a madman from the cavern, dropping the buckskin that had blistered his fingers, before reaching the open air. Soon, however, he burst forth into the light of the eventide, beholding the red glow in the west—blood-red, as appeared everything.

His wound had opened, and little streams of blood ran down over his death-pale brow, and temples, and cheeks.

Gasping for breath, in his agony of soul Rattler plunged down upon the rocky shelf, and ran, as if drawn by some influence he could not resist, toward the river; although it was a sheer precipice of full fifty feet, as he well knew, for there he had felt the feathered shaft brush his cheek.

On he went, beating the air with his fists, his sombrero gone, his blood-matted hair and gore-streaked face giving him a horrible appearance. In a moment or two, he stood upon the brink of the steep, above the rolling waters of the Rio San Saba; the terrific sounds of battle filling his ears.

Downward he gazed, as if guided by some irresistible power; when a sight met his view, in perfect consonance with the happenings of the night.

It was one that increased his heart's agony.

What was it?

Far down, upon the opposite side of the river, was a fire; and beside that fire lay the outstretched form of Paul Pemberton, his wrists and his ankles secured to the stakes driven into the earth!

But this was not all.

Around and around the fire and the captive, in spasmodic hop and bound, with menacing tomahawk in the right and gleaming scalping-knife in the left hand, was a Comanche brave, hideous in war-paint and demoniac in triumph, as at times these weapons were raised upward, as if to call the attention of the air spirits to this victim on the war-trail.

This was the young brave who had captured Paul, the moment the latter had fired his rifle, and slain the red raider who was about to murder his father.

The sight fairly dazed Rattler with horror.

Naught but blood and death, and torture of soul and body reigned on the San Saba!

But the cup of the ranger was not yet full, for at the next moment after this dread discovery, when he stood appalled and helpless to aid the unhappy youth, a bright light shot through the bottom-timber and afar heavenward, followed by an explosion that fairly shook the rocky cliffs upon which he stood. Then a piercing shriek came from below Rattler's station—a shriek which he knew but too well, and which pierced his very soul.

Down the young man gazed with staring eyes bending over the cliff, his teeth and hands clinched, when through the air, from a point far below him, shot a female form down into the waters, disappearing from view but soon reappearing and floating upon the surface of the river, which was turned to molten gold by the firelight that played upon it.

The face was clearly defined.

It was the face he loved so well—the face of his darling, Pearl Pemberton!

Could the fiendish Comanches have devised such torture as the young ranger had suffered since coming within view of the San Saba ford?

No! a thousand times, no!

The strong man's form suddenly became erect.

There was a strange light in his eyes.

It was only by a superhuman effort that he tore his gaze from that floating face. Then he held his breath and sprung afar out into the great chasm, keeping his arms to his side and his feet fast pressed together, shooting down that dangerous height, and plunging, with a far-sounding splash and spatter, into the calm, deep waters.

Down he went, providentially striking a deep pool. Then, struggling he arose, gasping for breath, and stupefied, but not for any length of time.

In wide, sweeping strokes he spurned the waters, down the current toward that floating form, now buoyed by the air in the clothing which had been forced in by the young girl's mad plunge.

Soon Rattler grasped and held her, while on, down the current toward the ford, he sped. He dared not even look upon that loved face, which might, with his life, be torn from him, through want of caution and alertness.

Keenly he swept the shades and rocks on both sides, and listened; but the stampede had passed the ford, as had also the Indians in pursuit of it.

However, the exultant yells of the Comanches at the timber-cove he could plainly hear; and it was with the cunning, and caution, and skill,

which he knew so well how to practice, that Rattler reached a thicket within a break of the gorge, and on the east side of the same near the ford, and within a few yards of the Indians he had slain at the commencement of the horrors, when he had witnessed the lassoing of Pearl in the ford.

"Father in Heaven, I thank Thee!"

Thus cried the young man, in soul-felt, grateful words, as he sunk exhausted in the thicket, Pearl's corpse-like form in his arms.

Covering her pale face with kisses, himself moaning in anguish at her condition, and the thought of her almost unendurable sufferings, the Texas Rattler chafed the maiden's wrists, and endeavored to bring her back to consciousness.

While he was thus occupied, the joy of the young ranger may be imagined when he heard the low, well-known and peculiar whinny of his faithful and well-tried steed quite near to him, in the thicket where Old Rocky had thoughtfully secured the animal.

Laying Pearl tenderly upon the leafy carpet, Rattler ran to his horse, which manifested its pleasure by rubbing its nose against its master's shoulder—he patting the animal affectionately and uttering low words of caution, as he unlocked his blankets and *malettos*, and spreading the former on the ground, returned to his darling, bringing her to the blanket and laying her upon it.

Quickly the young man procured a flask of brandy from his saddle-bags, and poured some of it between the almost colorless lips, while he bathed her forehead and temples. His tears were kept back with difficulty as he looked upon the beautiful being whom he adored, now in such a forlorn and terrible condition.

The fact that he had seen Paul a captive, while an Indian danced around the poor youth, was now entirely lost sight of in the joy and relief the young man experienced at coming safely out from his dangerous leap from the cliff, which, had his body taken a curve, or struck otherwise than perpendicularly, or had the water been shallow and with a rock bottom, must have resulted fatally.

This, and his having gotten Pearl to a place of comparative safety, caused him, in his half-demonized state of mind, to be oblivious to all else, except the necessity for exercising the utmost caution.

The poor girl soon moaned slightly, and opened her eyes, meeting the ardent, thankful and loving gaze of the one whom, in all the world, she most desired to meet, but had never again expected to see.

We may, to a certain extent, imagine the rapture, the extreme gratitude, and the expressions of love that passed between these two faithful hearts, that had been parted in so fearful a manner, and now met under such dread horrors and terrible experiences.

It is certain that no pen could do justice to the occasion.

But during this, the fact that she had seen her little brother in the power of a hideous savage—which scene was what had caused her to leap from the mouth of a cavern in the cliff, reached only by long wanderings in the honey-combed hill of rock, when she escaped from the cave of horrors—this sight could not long remain unspoken of by Pearl.

Besides, she had heard the terrific war-whoops, shots, and yells, and knew that a battle was then being fought.

The Texas Rattler had seen and heard the same, as he informed her in their mutual explanations, and Pearl, with tears in her eyes, pleaded with her lover to go and release her brother, if possible. The young man gave it as his opinion, that the train had been captured, and all connected with it slain, and he confessed that, did Pearl think she could bear to remain in the thicket alone with his horse, he would like much to rescue Paul, and also to ascertain the fate of the teamsters, the colonel and Old Rocky, asserting that the latter had been in that very thicket, and that it was to him he owed the safety of his faithful horse, for he had recognized the old scout's peculiar tie of the lariat, which was an old-time arrangement between them.

The consultation of the strangely-met pair was brief, as the occasion demanded; and, as darkness had now set in, the Texan Rattler believed it would be perfectly safe for Pearl to remain concealed in the thicket.

Consequently the youthful pair tore themselves apart with mutual words of hope and caution; and Rattler, after drawing the wet loads from his revolvers, wiping the cylinders carefully, and reloading, stole away in the semi-darkness, leaving all he loved on earth, one who had passed through terrors and horrors sufficient to have killed or crazed most of her sex—leaving Pearl Pemberton alone with his noble steed, both of them fully aware that they might never again meet on earth.

CHAPTER XIII.

DESERTING HIS CAPTIVE.

THE young brave who was performing the torture dance around Paul Pemberton, by way of practice, and to enjoy the terror of his cap-

tive, had not gone but a short distance from the point at which he had stolen up behind the youth and felled him to the earth, when he arrived at a small clear space on the margin of the river, where he halted to rest and to hold counsel with himself.

In his own estimation he had performed a most daring and valorous deed.

He had seen the boy, Paul, shoot his brother brave, as the latter was about to slay a white man, which fact caused the Comanche to think that he had captured a young warrior of distinction and bravery among the whites.

This had satisfied him for the nonce.

He had no desire to stand and meet the big Texan, who stood, as he thought, awaiting combat; and it was the greatest of wonders to him in what manner his comrade brave, who had lost his life, had gotten the big white man in his power.

It was a matter of great self-gratulation to this young Comanche that he had been able to bring his captive thus far; for it had been no easy task, and he had feared pursuit. Indeed, he fully believed that the big white man had pursued him, but that he had cunningly eluded him; and this was also a matter of great pride and satisfaction.

Knowing that nearly all of his party, who had left camp with Black Fox had been slain, he was aware that to return to camp alone with a white captive would be a great honor to him; and he did not in the least regret that his fellow brave had been slain, as his death had been the means of procuring him a captive.

He had won a name in his tribe by this evening's work, and he was as vain of the fact as could be imagined.

He knew that did he return at once to camp, he would not receive the amount of praise, or be as much appreciated for his act, as after the return of Big Foot and the war-party. Indeed, the longer he remained secreted, the more surprise he would cause, the more envy he would create among the young braves, and the more his act would be appreciated and praised by the old warriors and their chief.

In consequence of this knowledge, he resolved that he would have a little diversion by himself, and right at that particular point, as he was there less liable to be intruded upon by friends or enemies than either up or down the stream.

He therefore proceeded as he had often seen his elders do; securing Paul to the earth while the youth was still insensible, in the way which has been described, and as was witnessed by the young ranger and Pearl.

For a long time he sat, contemplating his captive, before gathering a quantity of sponge-like moss, which he held beneath the surface of the water, but a few paces from the captive. Then, returning, he allowed the water to run off upon the face of Paul quite copiously.

Soon the poor youth revived, and his anguish, as he thought of his father, perhaps slain—and, for all he knew, his darling sister also—was most poignant. Far stronger was it than the terror and concern he felt at his own position; for, in his own case, death would be welcome if his father and Pearl were no more.

He understood but too well the occasion of his father and Old Rocky dashing into the timber-cove, as told by Bud Blossom.

Pearl had, as usual, gone on ahead of the train, had entered the cove, and had been captured by Indians. Then the old scout had followed, and the colonel also.

Had the former been slain?

If not, there was hope that he would rescue Pearl; but it appeared as though Old Rocky must have been killed, else he would have remained with Colonel Pemberton, who would himself have been slain had not Paul arrived at the very instant that he did.

But, had not his father been killed later on?

It seemed to the poor boy that this must be the case, or certainly he would follow the brave who had captured his son.

Perhaps this very Comanche had killed him! This seemed only too probable, and a shudder convulsed Paul's frame, as he now gazed upon his hideous captor; who, for all he knew to the contrary, might be his father's murderer.

It pleased the young brave hugely thus to see his captive tremble, but a crashing in the bushes caused the Comanche to dart from him, and from the river inland; where he shrunk into a thicket, appalled at the sight of none other than Colonel Pemberton, whose appearance, in his headlong dash up the river in mad search of his lost ones was simply terrific.

Waiting until the mad rider was at some distance up the stream, the young brave returned, congratulating himself upon not having kept on with his captive; for he recognized the ranchero as the big white man, whom his boy captive had saved from the knife of his comrade brave, and he knew the white chief—for his aspect proclaimed the horseman as such, as did his lone dash in the direction of Big Foot's camp—was on the trail of himself and the young white brave.

When the fierce whoops of the war-party of Big Foot rung in the ears of the young brave, it awakened the war spirit within him; and he at

once built a fire, knowing that he was safe from observation, and that, in the din of battle, no one would hear him.

As for Paul Pemberton, he was greatly alarmed at the sounds, and knew that his father's train was being attacked as soon as he heard the ringing of the rifles and the rattling of the revolvers. Indeed, he had no doubt that the teamsters were then being massacred; and at the thought, tears burst from his eyes.

Such horrors were too terrible!

Why, oh, why had his father persisted in coming to this dread San Saba region?

And the young brave stood and stared at his weeping captive in the greatest wonder and scorn.

That this young white warrior, who had shot his fellow-brave, should shed tears like a squaw—that "eye rain" should fall over his cheeks—was passing strange; and Paul lost all prestige with his captor, who began to believe that he had not, after all, done such a valorous deed as he had supposed.

Instantly, then, he began the torture-dance, and regained his favorable opinion of his captive when he saw that his most horrible grimaces and yells were not noticed by the youth, whose eyes became suddenly clear, having in them a desperate light, while the flash of weapons directly in his face caused not a wink or flinch.

Then it was that the loud explosion occurred, followed by the piercing shriek which drew Paul's gaze; and to his joy, mingled with horror, he saw Pearl, his sister, leap from a dark cavity in the cliff, on the opposite side of the river, into the stream!

This was torture the most terrible to Paul, who struggled in vain to free himself.

But the amazement of the youth, at the sight of his sister in that strange place, was as nothing when he perceived none other than Rattler, the Ranger, afar up the cliff, and standing upon the very verge of the same. More than dumfounded, and also agonized with the most dread concern, was Paul, when he saw Rattler leap from the dizzy height and shoot straight down into the river.

He heard plainly the awful plunge into the waters. He even saw the spray, as it flew high, and the poor boy felt sure he had seen the last of his sister and her lover.

It seemed the very height of cruelty that, situated as he was already and agonized in body and mind to the very soul, the Fates should ordain such a scene before his eyes, that were so soon to close in death—that the two so dear to him should, at that particular time and place, plunge to destruction before his eyes.

But, after listening intently, Paul heard a regular movement in the waters as made by a strong swimmer—the same rolling up the bank, for the stream was there deep and narrow—and a thrill of joy came into his heart, for he began to believe that the ranger had survived that awful plunge, and his object was now plainly apparent.

Rattler had, it was certain, bounded from the cliff to save Pearl from drowning; and he would accomplish his purpose, if it were possible.

But how, in the name of wonder, the young ranger happened to be on the San Saba at this most horrible of horrible times, was, though most providential, very strange and puzzling.

So thought Paul Pemberton, upon whom the strange and awful occurrences of the evening were beginning to have a remarkable effect, considering his extreme youth. But Paul was a true Texan boy.

He resolved that he would, in some way, effect an escape, and join Rattler and Pearl. Then, he could find his father, if indeed the colonel was yet alive. Perhaps Old Rocky had not been slain; indeed Paul could not believe this to be so, for he had been confident that the old scout was invincible, and not born to die at the hand of the red-skins.

Desperate and determined, hoping for the best, and, by an exertion of will, putting back and crowding down all depressing thoughts, Paul now bent his mind upon endeavors to escape; planning all manner of ways and devices to that end, for he felt that his captor would soon start with him to the camp of the war-party, and this, he trusted and hoped would be his opportunity.

Upon looking around, however, Paul could see nothing of the Comanche, and he was astounded.

The fire was now dying down.

Whither had his captor disappeared?

Had he gone for help to bear him away?

Such were the thoughts that ran through the youth's mind.

The explanation is soon made.

The young brave was dumfounded on hearing the shriek from the cliff beyond the river, but when he saw the beautiful white squaw dart into the water, all his superstitious fears were aroused.

The plunge of Rattler from the awful height was more impressive still, and the Comanche was for the moment paralyzed. What could it mean? The cliff beyond must be peopled with

the spirits of the slain whites, who were now coming back to earth for revenge!

Believing that no living human being could make the plunge from that high cliff, and retain life, the young brave, when he saw Rattler, the Ranger, arise to the surface, and strike out, believed that a supernatural being had come for him expressly; and, without a thought of his captive, the Indian shot like an arrow from a bow into the depths of the dark woods, crashing over and through obstructions as though the fiends of his traditions were after him, as he felt assured they really were.

Thus, the shriek of poor Pearl Pemberton was the signal for the strange, indeed mysterious, happening on the San Saba bank.

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD ROCKY'S RUSE.

"WA-AL, by ther bleed, an' meat, an' bones of ole Davy Crockett! Somebuddy kick off my knee-pans, pull out my toe-nails, skin me from head ter heel, and then chuck me inter ther San Saba fer catfish bait!

"Double up an' dang my ole bestest bleed mersheen, ef I ever war tuck back this-er-way, afore er abind either; an' I can't quite undercomstan' hit. Ther hull dang poperlation o' this hyer big ball o' dirt, red, white, an' yaller, an' ther critters tu, hev gun plum lunified!

"Hyderphobic indig' an' hellishness air scattered 'roun' permisc'us-like, an' my brain-locx air on ther biz buzz, like forty swarms o' bees hed crawled inter my years. Jumpin' Jerusalem, an' Jericho counted in! Ef I doesn't b'lieve ther eend o' everythin' air purty nigh!

"Thar's my nag gone back on me, fer ther fu'st time in hit's life. I w'u'dn't hev b'lieved he'd 'low any human critter ter ontie him, far less ter straddle him; but he's levanted, dead sure an' sartain!"

Thus Old Rocky expressed his surprise and indignation, as he reached the base of the craggy cliff, in his headlong rush, and found his horse gone.

The old man was terribly excited and agonized, in regard to the destruction and death which had overwhelmed the outfit of which he was guide; although no blame could be attached to him, for he had warned the ranchero that the very catastrophe which had already happened was liable to occur.

At the same time, he had not thought it possible that Indians were so far down-country at that particular time. But the state of affairs was one that was always taken advantage of by Big Foot.

The Comanche chief knew that other war-parties had been driven beyond Fort Belknap by the rangers, with great loss; consequently, he had swooped around, in a semi-circular trail, and reached the point near where the others had been met by the rangers, and turned back to their villages.

The terrible sounds of battle filled the ears of the old scout, and he knew that the train was doomed—that all would be slain, who happened to be with the wagons at the time Big Foot and his braves charged upon them.

He had no doubt, at the time he reached the place where he had left his horse, that Colonel Pemberton was with the train, and that he, together with Paul, would be killed. But Old Rocky was not one to pass such an unusual thing as the taking of his horse, without a critical examination of the ground where the animal had stood; and he proceeded at once to do so, after standing a moment, listening to the sounds of the conflict, venting his feelings rapidly as recorded, all the while ejecting tobacco-juice and chewing more vigorously and spitefully than, perhaps, ever before.

As he sunk upon his knees, to look for "sign," he continued his characteristic soliloquy.

"Cuss my cats, an' catermounts, an' wile-cats, an' ther catercombs what Joe Booth used ter tell about, throwed in, ef I ever war so worritated an' sot back! Sich a conglomerated, whirligig'd, tossed up an' tumbled every which way mess o' mush I never see'd, an' I hopes I never will ag'in.

"Purty Pearl gobbled up, an' Rattler, I reckon, tu; an' ther bull outfit gone ter smash an' kingdom come, in a few flickers of a June-bug's wing! Paul an' ther ole mulish curnil sendd on ther lightnin' whiz ter ther t'other world, without hevin' a show to say a pray, or hev a shake with a ole pard; though, ef ther leetle gal air gobbled, an' Rattler, tu, an' this hyer ole raw-hide ripper doesn't yank 'em outen ther red ha'r-t'arers' clutches, hit's a good thing ole man Pemberton air gone on ther long, dark trail, fer he'd never eat or sleep ag'in, I reckon, fer fotebin' his darter byeraway.

"What! Why, dang an' double-dang my ole gizzard, ef ther curnil ain't turned out boss-thief, an' commenced by freezin' ter my four-huffed pard!

"Ther ole coon must ha' dusted back hyer on ther rampage, an' hev skuted arter Pearl, jist in time ter save his carkiss from bein' scarified. I reckon ther ole boss'll take him cl'ar o' ther red bellyuns. But whar's leetle Paul?

"Dang me, but I'll save ther boyee, ef I gits my head skinned a-tryin'!"

The old scout, in the examination that he had made of the ground, had not only discovered a colored handkerchief, which he knew belonged to Colonel Pemberton, but, near the ford, he had found the foot-prints of his employer, as he had returned to the north side of the river.

Further on he made out the trail of his horse, but was forced to bound quickly among the rocks, and conceal himself just above the base of the gulch; for, with a wild dash, on came the stampede of the animals of Colonel Pemberton, a terrified mass of brutes, plunging into the ford, and turning the river into a seething and foaming mass of waters—the spray almost concealing the brutes from view.

Forced on from behind, the leaders were shot forward, soon reaching the north bank, and thundering up the gulch; and Old Rocky wore a grim smile of satisfaction, as he saw numbers of the Indians' mustangs, with their owners' saddles upon their backs and their jaw- straps flying.

With wild snorts, and thunderous clatter of hundreds of hoofs upon the rocky gulch-bed, on went the wild stampede; many of the animals being killed or maimed, by being hurled against the boulders and the sides of the gulch. The latter was quite narrow at this point, which was but a short distance from the stream at the spot where Rattler first caught a view of his darling Pearl, as she was being lassoed by red raiders.

Then appeared the exultant, paint-daubed fiends, fresh from their bloody work, and yelling like demons; their long hair flying afar behind, while each brandished, and circled, and prodded the air in their front with their long scalp-decorated lances; striking at imaginary enemies, and throwing themselves from view alongside of their wild-eyed, snorting, battle-terrified mustangs. Their hideous faces peeped at each other beneath the necks of their horses, and their long locks touched the very hoofs of the animals.

Well the savages knew they could not head the stampede until clear of the gulch, on the north plain; hence they cared not how much clatter, and what loud yells they made. Elated, blood mad, and anticipating the torture of their captives, knowing too that they had ample plunder to enable them to return at once to their villages, the Comanches strained every nerve and muscle, and their lungs as well, in mad evolutions of war, and wild whoops of triumph.

It was a terribly tantalizing sight to Old Rocky, knowing that without doubt some before him had slain, or at least assisted in slaying, the brave teamsters, who, he felt assured, must have fought like desperate and daring men—like true Texans—before they fell, or were captured.

He had proofs before him of the defeat of his friends, and he knew that the destruction of all the wagons would follow.

All of Colonel Pemberton's property would be swept away, like thistle-down before a "norther;" while there was little doubt that Paul had been killed, and Pearl was probably a captive! This last was worse than death, and most certainly the colonel himself would, if not shot or captured, go insane, and make way with his own life!

These thoughts flashed through the brain of the old scout, as the red demons dashed across the ford, throwing the water in wide-spreading spray on all sides; and, when they had just passed his position, infuriated and reckless of consequences, Old Rocky quickly drew bead with his trusty rifle, and pulled trigger. Then jerking one of his revolvers, he let fly, with unerring aim, six shots at the savage cavalcade.

Perhaps never before were a party of exultant red-skins, near the very point of a victory that was so complete, so dumfounded.

There was but half a score of the savages, and five of these fell from their mustangs to the bed of the gulch, uttering horrible death-yells; while two more sunk forward, clutching the manes of their beasts for support, and desperately wounded. The blood of Old Rocky was now up, and his success astonished himself.

His war-spirit and thirst for revenge ruled him, his hatred for the painted fiends before him was ungovernable; and, leaving his rifle, he sprang into the gulch, right upon the paralyzed and awe-stricken Comanches, firing his remaining revolver as he ran; and, before one of the survivors, who recognized their implacable, and, as they believed, invincible foe, could again dash on—they having made halt in their astonishment, hardly believing their senses—the spherical messengers of death from the old scout's revolvers had pierced their vitals.

Not one of those remained alive who, but a moment before, were so full of fiendish exultation, practicing, in their mad glee, their maneuvers of war!

The old scout succeeded in catching two of the mustangs at once, which he secured to a bush. He then quickly reloaded, his eyes blazing with the light of battle and revenge, and a thirst for more worlds to conquer, as he darted down the gulch to ascertain if more of the red foe approached. But none were within view.

Old Rocky then proceeded to scalp each

brave, in a dexterous manner; and cut off the right ear of each, besides splitting their noses.

He then bound one of the corpses upon a mustang, using a large piece of deadwood to secure to the back, to keep it in a natural position; there being two lariats upon the saddles of the animals he had captured, which now came to good use.

Cutting strips of buckskin from the leggins of another corpse, he strung the scalps upon one, and the ears upon another. He then secured one to each of the wrists of the dead brave upon the horse, the mustang meanwhile being perfectly frantic with fright—a warning of that which might be expected to come.

The old scout then urged this strangely-mounted mustang into the shades of the river-bottom from the ford, and then fastening the animal in a thicket, he stole toward the cave in the timber, in the direction of the scene of the gallant fight of the teamsters, and their heroic death—toward the howling, whooping mob of exultant red raiders, toward the remnant of Big Foot's merciless marauders!

CHAPTER XV.

AT THE COMANCHE CAMP.

OLD ROCKY stole, as silently as could any of the Comanches themselves, through the undergrowth, which was now quite dark, until he reached the vicinity of the wagon-camp; needing no guide, as large fires were blazing about the wagons, and a perfect bedlam of sounds was reigning there.

The old scout lost no time in climbing up a huge moss-draped tree, on the border of the timber-cove, and crawled out upon the extreme portion of one of the largest limbs, from a covert in the moss and foliage of which he could view the fearful scene below him.

The mustang, to the back of which he had secured the blood-dripping victim of his revolver—fastening the scalps and ears of the slain to the corpse—had not as yet arrived in the "open;" doubtless for the reason that the beast had been lashed most terribly in the head-long charge upon the wagon fort, and in pursuit of the stampede, after a hard day's ride. It would therefore be greatly fatigued, and finding itself free from the cruel quirt, had slackened speed to a walk; but Old Rocky felt sure that the animal, with the strange burden upon its back, would join those of its kind, or naturally follow the track of the stampede, into the camp of the unfortunate teamsters.

The old borderer felt the greatest satisfaction at having been enabled thus to send his "card," in the shape of "ha'r an' years," to Big Foot.

This feeling had been a great relief to the scout, feeling the self-condemnation that he did—though somewhat unjustly—that he had not returned with Colonel Pemberton to the train, after ascertaining that Raybold, the Ranger, was on the trail to the rescue of Pearl; and leaving plain "sign" that he was capable of effecting his purpose, if any one could be, in the shape of eight scientifically "laid out" braves, which Old Rocky now regretted he had not scalped, before the stampede "spiled ther ha'r."

The scene that met the view of the old scout was hardly calculated to lessen the fury and thirst for revenge, which ruled him, and most justly.

The wagons had been placed quite near together, the small number necessitating this, when placed in an oblong, the tongue of each thrust under the rear of the next, and the force of the terrible explosion—there having been a large quantity of powder in the one fired by the teamster at the last moment—had, in some cases, thrown the wagon-body entirely apart, and overturned the remainder: blowing the tilts from the hoops, and scattering the goods upon the ground, "very handy," as a Yankee would say, for the inspection of the red raiders at their leisure.

Boxes had been broken open, and goods scattered about; but this had, doubtless, been put a stop to by Big Foot, who had had the dead braves, slain in the fight, placed side by side in a row on the east side of the wrecked wagons.

The bodies of the slain teamsters had been hacked and mutilated beyond recognition, and the scalps of the poor fellows hung upon a pole, near to something which caused Old Rocky to shudder, and grate his teeth with pent-up fury.

This was the bind axle-tree, with its wheels, which had been blown from a wagon by the explosion, for some twenty feet to the north of the wrecks. The pole alluded to had been inserted in the ground, touching the middle portion of the axle-tree; the scalps, dangling and blood-smeared, hanging some eight feet above, and tied to a cross-piece.

But neither the scalps, nor the axle-tree with its huge wheels would have attracted more than a passing attention from Old Rocky; for the former owners of these trophies of savage war and cruelty were past all suffering.

More, ay, far more, was there in that view which drew deep groans, and shudders, and a grating of teeth together, with a contortion of vengeful fury upon the old scout's face, as well as flashes from his keen eyes; rendering his

usually mild, tranquil, and rather pleasant looking countenance, almost fiendish in expression.

And, we must admit that it was no wonder.

But, to explain:

Secured to each wheel, their backs against the same, their arms outstretched, and their legs spread to the utmost—all bound firmly with raw-hide ropes, body, legs, and arms; the ropes cutting deep into the flesh—were the two surviving teamsters. Their heads were bent over the upper portion of the wheel, their necks being hard pressed against it, and the backs of their heads held tightly to the broad portion of the tire by a raw-hide band which was drawn about their foreheads. Thus the faces of the sufferers were upturned, the strain keeping their mouths agape.

Suffering the torments of the lost were these unfortunate Texans, who had been defeated in their determination to die fighting the red foe; they having escaped death by the explosion, by being thrown prostrate to the earth, at some distance from the powder-wagon.

The fiendish ingenuity of this original preliminary torture can at once be seen.

The wretched victims were forced to gaze upward, at the blood-reeking scalps of their slain comrades, who had, happily for them, lost their lives heroically, fighting to defend the wagons and other property of their employer.

Probably there was not one of the number, who thought for a moment of fleeing; although escape was open to all, had they started at once, upon the first appearance of the war-party around the corner of the cove.

By a run to the dense undergrowth, thence to the river, and crossing it—the party taking refuge in the cliffs on the opposite side of the stream—they could have defied themselves against even the fearful odds that had menaced them. It was presumable to suppose that some one of the number knew of the cliffs on the opposite side of the San Saba; or, at least, that the same formation existed at different places along the river.

Certainly they all knew that they were doomed when the horde of Big Foot rounded the corner of the timber-cove.

True and loyal to the last, bravely these men stood their ground, and died in their tracks with arms in their hands; with the exception of those who, as we have just seen, were reserved for a more fearful fate.

No human being would have cared to look upon the scene which has been but faintly described—the victims of a torture which was as naught to that which they had yet to undergo, were they not rescued—except possibly one who was cursed with a morbid curiosity to a deformed or unusual extent, and he not more than once if he fully understood the awfully suggestive scene, and realized the agony that the poor teamsters were enduring.

Old Rocky instinctively clutched at his rifle, and came near falling to the earth; probably, had he done so, to have met the same fate as his friends.

Then he closed his eyes, tore off a huge quid of "nigger-head," and chewed snappishly and wolfishly, ejecting tobacco juice toward the Comanches; the same, luckily for him, being absorbed by a festoon of moss which hung at a convenient distance.

However, the old scout was not one to lose a single feature of the scene.

He had one important object in view.

He now counted the number of the slain, they having been separated, and hacked and mutilated by different small parties of braves, in order that each one of the savages might dip his hands in blood, and taste the same, dividing and devouring the hearts of their victims. This was their hellish custom, as they performed a fiendish, but short and peculiar dance.

To the relief of Old Rocky, he found that neither Colonel Pemberton nor his son were among the slain—for only the number representing the teamsters was there—and certainly they had been captured. Neither had Rattler nor Pearl been taken, unless by those who had been detached as dismounted scouts, and taken to the main camp.

This greatly relieved the old scout's mind.

Big Foot, in all his hideous fiendishness and paraphernalia of war, strode proudly about the camp, for such it was; a mule having been killed, that happened to be secured by a neck-roped on the border of the cove, and the Indians were now devouring the flesh, jerking the same from the coals, after merely scorching each side of the steak.

A box of hard biscuit had been discovered among the freight of the wagons, and these were devoured with the horseflesh, with evident relish and delight.

Only a few seconds sufficed for the old scout to "take in" the scene as it has been described, and to make note of another and somewhat important fact. That was, that many of the mustangs of the red raiders were secured to the branches of the trees, or the outer undergrowth beneath him.

Of this fact he soon made a mental note.

Just then he gazed somewhat anxiously toward the inner end of the cove, and immediately a great change came over him.

He was about to enjoy some little satisfaction for the inhuman torture of his friends, the teamsters, and the disasters that the war-party had occasioned; for on, at terrific speed, evidently frightened by a skulking wolf, which catching the scent of blood, had sprung into the track of the stampede to follow the same, led by an instinct of its own to know that it would thus find its supper—on, toward the Comanches, came the mustang with its ghastly load, the dead warrior, bringing silent, but plain, evidence of the fate of his comrades, and that an avenger, a terrible avenger, was near at hand, whose work was begun in a systematic and business-like manner, the vouchers being delivered.

Big Foot halted suddenly in his walk; for, as the moon now shone brightly, the animal and its rider were clearly defined, though not to an extent to show that the Indian was dead.

Certainly there was something strange about him.

His long hair flew not in the wind of his speed, and his manner was unnaturally stiff in the saddle; while his arms hung listless, being slightly jerked up and down by the bounds of the mustang.

The entire Comanche party thought that it was a messenger from the party of braves who had gone after the stampede; but, as the strange rider—strange, because not guiding his steed, and because of the appearance described—drew nearer, all ceased eating. Those who were reclining sprung to their feet with "ughs" of surprise; even Big Foot giving a loud "waugh!" and striding forward to meet the new-comer.

The warriors, at a signal from their chief, spread out quickly in a triangular manner; for all saw the brave who approached was incapable of guiding his mustang, being evidently not only wounded but scalped.

The horse would have broken through the line of warriors, so terrified was the animal, had not some sprung forward and caught the jaw-strap, the slack end of which Old Rocky had fastened to the saddle.

Directly between two fires was the mustang, when it was brought to a halt, and then, such a yell shot out from every throat simultaneously, that the very leaves on the adjacent trees fluttered, and Old Rocky lay back and shook as in a spasm, clawing the bark from the trees like a panther about to spring, in his great exultation and mirth—forgetting, for the moment, the tortured captives.

The old scout nearly strangled by swallowing a portion of his quid of "nigger-head," and, had not the confusion and interest below him been so intense, he would doubtless have betrayed his position by his spasmodic coughing; the tears actually running down his cheeks, for the first time probably in many years.

When Old Rocky recovered himself and cleared his eyes, he saw the entire party of Comanches packed around the mustang, the dead brave being cut loose and the animal secured to a wagon.

Then the braves separated, two of them laying their dead comrade outstretched upon the earth, and then, as the scalps and ears were discovered, the quick packing of the warriors around the horse, all staring at the face and scalped head of the brave, having prevented these from being noticed before, such yells of vengeance and howls for the slain, and whoops of war, shot out alternately, as were terrific and almost deafening!

Big Foot's voice rung out in quick command, and a half-dozen braves sprung upon their mustangs and lashed the animals toward the ford.

The Comanche chief evidently saw that the herd might be lost to him, the animals being the most coveted portion of the plunder.

He then looked about his greatly thinned war-party, apparently meditating sending out searchers for the foe who had slain his braves; but Old Rocky laughed in his sleeve—for he knew well what Big Foot was bothered about—as the order failed to pass the chief's lips.

The old scout now stole down the tree with the utmost care, and as he was about to drop from the lowermost limbs, to his great amazement he discovered a young Comanche brave crouched beneath, gazing into his own camp, but not revealed to view!

Old Rocky remained in his perch, but in a moment the young brave stole directly beneath him, casting apprehensive glances toward the camp, but keeping on in the direction of the river.

Filled with amazement at first, the old scout soon gave a chuckle of joy, and glided after the young brave, through the undergrowth. On second consideration, he had connected this Comanche with some of his missing friends.

Old Rocky was correct.

The red was none other than the captor of Paul Pemberton, who had been frightened from the river and his captive by Pearl, and then Rattler, springing from the cliff; but who, after witnessing now the rage of the chief and his warriors, felt that he would rather face unknown, than real and present dangers, and thought of returning to his captive. He began to fear that, as so many warriors had been slain, he, in a measure, would be at this late

hour in rather a bad fix, if he had not something to show that would account for his long absence.

CHAPTER XVI.

SAVED FROM TORTURE.

OLD ROCKY had but just crossed the ford, and sent his ghastly messenger toward Big Foot and his war-party, when Rattler, swimming with the unconscious Pearl Pemberton, passed around a sharp bend in the river just above, and came within sight of the ford.

Had the ranger been two minutes sooner in turning the bend, he would have discovered Old Rocky; but the cruel Fates had ordained that this was not to be.

However, when he left Pearl with his horse in the thicket, starting out for the purpose of liberating Paul, the old scout was following the Comanche brave; all having the same objective point, namely the place where Paul lay, struggling to free himself from his bonds.

It so happened that Rattler did not reach the point in question, until the young brave glided into the little "open" by the river-side; the ranger stealing up to pounce upon the Indian by the bank, while the scout was doing the same thing, with the same object in view, approaching inland.

The Comanche entered the "open" with no little caution, and was evidently agreeably surprised to find that his captive had not been liberated. After a close inspection of the face of the cliff and the river, he slipped near to his captive, drew his tomahawk, and raised it, as on a former occasion.

The captive closed his eyes, thinking that his time had really come.

But at that very instant two dark forms shot from the undergrowth, from the different points mentioned, bounding directly upon the young brave.

One—the ranger—was a trifle in advance of the other, and his knife was driven with great force to the very buckhorn in the brave's breast, while at the same time he hurled his victim into the river. Turning, he faced Old Rocky, knife in hand—for Rattler had seen the scout approach, but had taken him for another Indian.

"Wa-al, Jumpin' Jerusalem!" exclaimed the latter; "ef hit ain't yeou, Rattler, what's cheated me out'n my meat! Cuss my cats, put hit thar!"

"Shake it is, Old Rocky," said the ranger; "this is one lucky moment. By Heavens! I only hope it is the turning-point for us. But we are forgetting Paul. We can talk after we have cut that poor boy free."

This was soon accomplished, and such a sudden transformation from captivity, with certain death staring him in the face, to liberty and friends, as Paul experienced, seldom occurs.

The youth's astonishment was deeper than that of either Old Rocky or Rattler.

The old scout was for once without words.

He felt a choking sensation in his throat as he saw these two, so truly attached to each other, thus reunited. These were now accounted for, but there were two more still to find.

Rattler knew there was no time to lose.

Lifting Paul to the river-bank, he said:

"Well, thank Heaven! Paul and Pearl are safe from the red fiends! Rocky, old pard, do you know anything of Colonel Pemberton?"

"I swan," said the old scout, "I'm so sot back, I doesn't know what ter say! I'm double-bar'l'd glad ter know ther leetle gal air right side up wi' care, but whar in thunderation be she?"

"Paul, leetle pard, gi'n us yer paw! I war arter ther red hellyun when Rattler chipped jist a flicker ahead o' me. I swan I war so s'prised I cl'ar fergut ter chaw, though I hev bin goin' hit hefty!"

"But Colonel Pemberton?" repeated the ranger; "how about him, Old Rocky?"

"All I knows 'bout ther curnil air thet he friz onter my critter, an' dashed up ther drink. I reckon he air plum lunified, an' hit ain't no wonder. But I axed whar Miss Pearl war."

"She's over the river, in the thicket, where you left my horse tied—you remember."

Old Rocky gave a deep groan and fell back as though he had been struck a heavy blow!

"What ails you, old pard?" asked Rattler, in alarm.

"Dang my dogs, ef ther bellishness air over! Thet's what I mean. I'm afeard ther condemned scum o' Big Foot 'll scoop ther leetle gal in ag'in!"

"Explain," cried the ranger, greatly agitated.

"Why, pard, jist a bit ago I laid out ten red hellyuns within half a shoot o' thet thicket, an' sculped 'em. Then I cut off the'r years, socked one onter a nag an' tied him fasted, an' sent ther corpus, with thar years an' ha'r, inter Big Foot's camp wi' my compliments."

"I saw no dead there, either above or below."

"They're jist above. An' while I war watchin' ther camp, I see'd six more start out arter ther herd—fer I cleaned out ther fu'st party,

bein' chuck-full o' hyderphobic indig' on 'count o' Paul an' Pearl, an' yeou. I thort yer war all gobbled up, er sent ter kingdom come on ther whiz."

"I won't ax yer how yer gut ther leetle gal—we uns hain't got time ter perlaver 'bout nothin'. Ef Pearl air hunk, we've got hefty biz ter git two feller mortals outen thar hellyuns clutches—two teamsters, Jim an' Bud—an' they air bein' tortur'd now wuss nor p'ison!"

Rattler had been completely stunned by the words of Old Rocky; his manner causing the young man more concern and anxiety than his words.

Without further talk, he cried out:

"Stay here, will you? I'll bring Pearl!"

The next moment, he darted headlong down the river, and through the undergrowth, like a madman.

Such had been the totally unexpected, indeed, undreamed-of, events since reaching the San Saba, so quickly had the one followed the other, so mysterious and tragic had they been, that our three friends who had met as we have described hardly knew what to say to each other.

The departure of the young ranger so hastily, almost dumfounded Old Rocky, although prepared for it, or thinking that he was.

"Wa-al, I swan ter thunder an' lightnin'! Hit do 'pear that ther hull o' our outfit hev gut ter be either wiped clean out on ther whiz, tortur'd, er go plum lunified," said Old Rocky, as he gazed after Rattler, and then ejected a squirt of tobacco-juice spitefully toward the timber-cove where the Comanches were then filling the air with unearthly howls; proving that they were re-arranging their dead, or performing some ceremony over them.

"Leetle pard, yer hev no idee how worritated an' flusterkated I hes bin, plum through this hull conglomerated bellishness. I lifted off a heavy load o' bilious grief, by takin' a peep et ther wagons, all smashed ter flinders, mong which war all what war left o' ther pore boyees, what fit like painters, es I knowed by ther poppin' o' ther shooters, which I heerd from ther rocks an' hyeraways."

"I see'd, by ther mashed an' hashed-up humans, thet yeou an' your dad warn't thar, an' thet war a comfort. I didn't know but what ther curnil hed bin gobbled, arter properatin' my critter, which w'u'dn't never 'low no human 'ceptin' me ter straddle him afore."

"Yer needn't talk a bit, Paul; when yer gits stout, with vim 'nough ter levant, we'll skute toward ther ford, fer ter see ef Rattler an' Miss Pearl air all O. K.; though I feels jubous 'bout ther gills 'bout 'em."

"Yer dad, I reckon, hev jist gone an' susan-sided, by lungin' right inter ther main camp, thinkin' yeou an' Pearl war thar, an' so gut gobbled. Fac' air, leetle pard, I air ther wustest worritated, an' mixed up conglomerated human what perergrinates this hyer yearth."

So saying, the old scout jerked his six-shooters, half-cocked them, revolving the cylinders to ascertain whether they were in proper order, all the time chewing vigorously at his quid. Then, as he saw the body of the young brave whom Rattler had slain, lodged against a snag, he waded out into the water, and scalped the Indian, placing the trophy in his belt.

Paul Pemberton had been so bewildered and distressed, after knowing that his father had, without doubt, stood and seen him carried away by the young Comanche, that he was utterly broken with grief and concern; for he well knew that his father must really have been almost demented, crazed by such a succession of horrible events, or he would have at once attempted a rescue.

But the probable danger to which Pearl was yet exposed, and the assertion of Old Rocky, that he believed the colonel was a captive in the main camp, aroused the youth to action; his daring and determined spirit coming in a moment, to the front.

He sprung to his feet, repudiating the pain that really was torturing from his lacerated ankles and wrists, while his head felt as heavy as lead from the effects of the blow from the tomahawk.

Staggering back and forth over the sward, he said:

"Old Rocky, just wait a moment until I get the stiffness out of my joints, and I am with you. I do not wonder that you feel so mystified at the sudden and marvelous changes in the chapter of horrors that have been enacted since we reached this seemingly accursed river. I saved my poor father when an Indian was astride of him with an uplifted knife, shooting the savage dead, when father sprung to his feet."

"Then the Comanche, that Rattler just now killed, knocked me senseless and brought me here. From this, it seems almost certain that my father must be insane, or he would have sprung to my defense, especially after I had just saved his life."

"Gi'n us yer paw ag'in, leetle pard!" burst out Old Rocky. "I thought a heap o' yer afore, but since yer bes wiped out a hellyun, an' saved yer dad, dang'd ef I ain't proud o' yer!"

"Thet 'counts fer all. Ther ole curnil, arter

I gi'n him ther leetle gal's hoss an' started him fer ther wagons, run ag'in' one o' ther spies o' ther cantankerous Big Foot; an' he bein' so worritated, an' not keepin' his peepers open, ther red crawled onter an' jist drapped him from his hoss.

"Thet war how'thar ha'r-t'arer gut straddle o' him—bet yer scalp!—an' then ther knock on ther cabase, what ther scarifier gi'n him, jist sot his ideas on a wile whirligig stompede. Mebbe so he c'u'dn't see yer et all, when he stud thar.

"Howsomever thet may be, his brain-box hev gut some loose screws inter hit; but we'll tighten 'em, ef ther cantankerous cusses o' red heathen doesn't jark 'em out altergether."

"Come, Old Rocky; I am ready, I believe. It makes me feel worse to talk. We must act, even if we lose our lives. I have suffered torture to some extent, but I swear that Bud Blossom and Jim shall be saved, as well as my father, if I can do anything toward it."

"Thet's pure Texas talk, leetle pard! Ye're a man, every inch on yer, an' I'll go hefty on yer help. Le's glide towards ther ford."

Both started, entering an "open" in the wood but twenty yards from the place Paul had been bound, when, crashing from the undergrowth on the opposite side toward the ford, dashed Rattler, the Ranger.

One glance was enough for his two friends.

The Rattler was alone!

He had not found Pearl.

More than this—the young ranger was as pale as death.

The moon's rays fell upon him, showing one like an avenging god, mounted upon one of the most magnificent steeds that man ever bestrode.

No eye ever gazed upon a fairer, nobler sight, with one noted exception. This was that the handsome face of the young man was so drawn with mingled anguish and fury—a look of reckless daring, that would stop at nothing until it met the cold hand of death—that it seemed unnatural and not the well-known visage of the brave Texan.

Like a thunderbolt he shot forward to the side of Paul and Old Rocky, and then, pointing toward the timber-cove, from which rung exultant yells which the old scout had not noticed, he said, in a hoarse and husky voice terrible in its very expression:

"Pards, Pearl is in the power of those Comanche devils! Remain here—I will rescue her or die! A thousand red torturers shall not daunt me!"

"Help ther ole man, Paul!"

Old Rocky had uttered these words before Raybold ended, and then, dropping his rifle as the ranger was about to drive spurs, he made a panther-like leap upward, clutching the young Texan, and the next minute the two were rolling on the ground.

Paul, who had instantly understood the old scout, clutched an arm of Raybold, and held it fast.

It was a strange scene, and had any of the Comanches come upon it, they would have been thunderstruck, to see two of the most noted scouts, their most terrible enemies, in seeming deadly conflict.

Old Rocky was a man of steel, old as he was, and he had given the Rattler a heavy fall purposely; the very suddenness of the assault, so totally astonishing and unexpected, served to lessen much the struggles of the young ranger, who believed his old friend had gone mad.

"Are you crazy, Rocky?"

This he asked, as soon as he could speak, in a voice that expressed the utmost wonder.

"Dang my dorgs, no! Hit's yeou, pard—gone plum lunified w' worritation! Say yer'll not stir a flicker without ther ole man an' Paul, er I'll skulp yer eyebrows, dead sure an' sartain!"

"I'm gittin' purty bilious an' keardless. Does yer s'pose ye're goin' ter git ther leetle gal outen thet outfit erlone by a dash inter thet roarin', ragin' mess o' hellishness? Not by a jug-ful!"

"Now, lay easy, an' low me ter sling gab! Ef hit's a lunge inter ther outfit o' ther cantankerous critters, why, we'll all lunge et onc't. They'd jist laugh all over, though I'll low ther heathens ain't given ter showin' when they're glad, 'ceptin' by lookin' ugly es hell. They'd laugh though, I kin asseverate an' afferdavy, ter see the Rattler glide in, fer they'd scoop yer, boyee, an' then barbecue yer afore purty Pearl's eyes."

"Dang hit! Will yer hide Racer, an' glide easy-like with me an' Paul, an' put up sly pints ag'in' ther scum scarifiers; er shell I split yer bleed mersheen, jist out o' pure mercy an' friendship! I swar, jist hyar, I'll salerwate ver afore yer'll git inter thet lay-out o' Big Foot's, ter be tortur'd! What's ther game?"

"Let me up, boys! I was mad—I see it now! But, so help me Heaven, if I see one of those murderous red devils lay a hand upon Pearl Pemberton, I'll go in, and go in to win or die, and all the world shall not stop me!"

"Thet's Texas talk, Rattler! I'm with yer in ther lunge, but yer sha'n't go alone, I swar by ther bleed o' Crockett! Let him up, Paul. Good boyee, leetle pard. I goes one better on

yer! I thought, dead sure, yer'd go ag'in' me in this byer thing, but yer head's level.

"Come on, boyees, an' put Racer in a cosey hole 'mong ther bushes, an' then I'll show yer ther hull circus from a front straddle of a limb."

The three then entered the thickets, Raybold leading his horse, while Paul clasped his hand, the old scout bringing up the rear, his rifle cocked and ready, his keen eyes shooting glances here, there, and everywhere, while he squirted tobacco juice more viciously than ever toward the Comanche "lay-out."

A great satisfaction was on Old Rocky's face as he looked at times upon the Apollo-like form of the young man whom he admired more than any other, and whom his prompt action without doubt, saved from torture.

CHAPTER XVII.

AGAIN A CAPTIVE.

AFTER the ranger left Pearl Pemberton in the gulch by the ford, with his noble horse to keep her company, the poor girl sobbed hysterically. And it was no wonder that she did so, after the fearful experiences through which she had passed, and the dangers that yet surrounded her; to say nothing of her deep anguish of heart, in connection with the ignorance she was in with reference to the safety of her father, and that terrible picture she had seen, with starting eyes, from the mouth of the cave in the cliff-side—namely, her darling brother Paul, bound in a torturing position, and captive to a hideous paint-daubed Indian, who danced, with demon-like weapons in hand, around the seemingly doomed youth.

No mortal would ever know the terror, horror, and dread, that poor Pearl had suffered in her lone wanderings after leaving the cavern of horrors by that providentially-discovered, but dark and forbidding passage; when the blood and paint-smeared Comanche, Black Fox, crawled over the floor of the cave-chamber after her—a craving for revenge and blood in his wild black eyes, that stared, beast-like, into hers, curdling the very blood in her veins.

Tremblingly, waveringly, casting apprehensive glances behind her, and into dark side-passages, expecting from each to behold that horribly-repulsive savage crawling toward her, with his baleful glance—thus the poor girl had passed on, in a continuous waking nightmare; at times making a halt, as the torch, which was her only hope, grew dim; holding the burning end downward, to allow more of the fat of the pine to flow into the fainting flame.

On and on, along the chief of the many passages, not knowing if she would ever emerge from the labyrinth, poor Pearl had proceeded; at times frightened nearly to fainting, at the phosphorescent glow from moldering bones, which lay in some black cavity of the rocks, the abandoned lair of some wild beast.

And indeed she dreaded nothing less than to meet some of these monsters of the mountain, which, she felt, must frequent the subterranean chambers of the bluff; but, in her mind, she decided that she would much rather face the wild beasts than the merciless savages who had captured her, and had been vanquished by her brave and daring hero, the Rampant Ranger!

Ever present in the hapless maiden's mind was her lover, from whom she had been parted for what seemed so long a time, and whom she had met so strangely and so providentially, only to be again parted from him in so cruel and tragic a manner, and amid horrors such as appall the very soul.

Little hope had poor Pearl that Raybold was alive, but she clung to that little hope, as a drowning man clings to the frailest spar.

She could only find no reason in her mind to explain his absence from the entrance to the cave-chamber, where she had seen him stricken down by the Comanche brave.

She could not bring herself to believe that the blow had killed him outright, but thought that the Indians had carried him away.

He had slain, it was probable, all who were in the cave, or badly wounded the one by whom she had been menaced; but others, it was almost certain, must have found him, and they were intending to return for herself.

Thankful, most thankful to Heaven, she indeed was, that she had evaded the savages who were in search of her, and she prayed most fervently that the brave young ranger might be spared to her, and that her father and Paul might escape the merciless red torturers.

But who can imagine the heartfelt terror of that poor maiden, when, in the dark bowels of the cliff, she tripped over a stone, fell at full length, and her torch became extinguished.

"Oh, God!" she cried out, in an anguish of soul, so strong that her utmost strength produced but a gasping whisper, "Oh, God! save Thy child!"

Then she crawled along in the darkness.

Her prayer had been heard.

She saw a faint grayish glow ahead, which grew brighter and brighter, and eventually she came to an opening in the cliff-side, some fifteen feet above the waters of the San Saba. There was no way out of the cave, except to bound into the river!

That wild leap we have seen her take.

But even that desperate act was forced upon her.

On the cliff she would have remained, had not that terrible scene burst upon her view, beyond the river, it being but a few feet from the bank.

It was no wonder then that, half-crazed by that fearful subterranean journey—that terrible journey and the subsequent horrors through which she had passed—that, upon beholding the awful situation of her brother, she sprang, with a piercing shriek, into the waters, there being no doubt, in her half-deranged state, that she thought of rushing to Paul's assistance, even though she could do no more than die for him. But she stopped not, for a moment, to reason upon it.

To return, however, to the thicket at the ford.

Poor Pearl Pemberton would never forget, to her dying day, the sight of her fondly-loved brother, bound in that painful manner, and with that savage Comanche dancing around him!

Would Rattler reach Paul in time to save his life?

That was now the question.

And, if so, would the two whom she loved so dearly, return to her in safety?

The ranger had asserted that Old Rocky had caught and secured his horse for him in the thicket.

This gave her hope that the old scout might be with her father, and that he would care for him, in this most terrible of all times that had come upon them.

Without doubt the train had been destroyed, and the brave teamsters had all been murdered, or worse than that, captured, which was awful to think of. Indeed, the poor maiden's brain burned and seethed, from dwelling on the horrors of the San Saba; until she felt that it would burst from its bone casket.

She had suffered a hundred deaths since she had first discovered the young ranger ride from around the boulder in the gulch.

His coming seeming to be the signal of an avalanche of horrors, that were strange and mysterious in the extreme.

The Fates seemed to have suddenly hurled all that would appall and destroy upon the house of Pemberton.

And yet poor Pearl was destined to very soon realize that the dread experiences, through which she had passed, were as nothing to those still in reserve—that the whole savage world had apparently combined to concentrate all its fiendishness upon her devoted head!

In the same insane state, that was born of her dread experiences, Pearl could not long remain passive.

Time seemed to drag while the Rattler was absent, so apprehensive was she that he would not succeed; that he himself would fall into the hands of the enemy.

She arose, drank a quantity of the brandy, as the ranger had recommended, and, as much as was possible, wrung out her saturated clothing.

Then she put her arms about the neck of Rattler's noble steed, and laid her head lovingly against the same, the horse manifesting the greatest delight at her attentions.

It was while she was thus occupied, that she heard the splashing made by horses crossing the ford near at hand.

Her mind had been picturing the happiness she would feel, should Rattler, Paul and her father return together, and this pleasant mental picture caused her almost to believe that it was true, when she heard the sounds we have mentioned.

Without a second thought, Pearl stole through the thicket to its outermost border, nearest the gulch bed, the sound of horses' hoofs, clattering directly toward the thicket, almost convincing her that her imaginary picture was about to prove real.

The next moment the foot of the poor girl caught in a vine, and she fell head-foremost through the bushes, and into the clear ground and moonlight!

A series of exultant yells at this instant pierced her ears and brain like shafts of steel at white heat, while with them were mingled the sounds of the on-dashing mustangs. The yells, she knew proceeded from the hideous red fiends whom she so much feared, and she groaned in an agony of soul, as she cried out:

"Oh, my God! Hast Thou indeed forsaken me?"

She struggled to her feet, as the snorting, wild eyed steeds bounded nearly upon her.

She saw the frightful, painted faces, the wild flying hair, the flaunting feathers, the glowing glances shot from serpent-like eyes, and all the paraphernalia of savage war, of horse and red raider—all these she saw in one flashing look. Then she felt herself clutched roughly, jerked from her feet and into the arms of a Comanche brave!

The next moment the maiden heard that same sound that had lured her to her fate—heard that sound ever after, though she should live a hundred years, which now seemed highly improbable, and which, although musical and

agreeable in itself, would be ever after as dread to her as the laughter of fiends—the splashing of waters as the exultant braves dashed through the ford, and then on at terrific speed, with terrible yells.

After the first glance at the repulsive, war-striped faces, Pearl had closed her eyes, and silently implored that she might be taken from the midst of these horrors. Utterly hopeless, utterly broken was the poor maiden then, and not again did she unclothe her lids until after the wild and bounding steeds had been jerked to a halt.

Then she felt herself taken by other hands, lowered to the earth, and heard a hell of sounds from savage throats. She opened her eyes, but it was to behold a sight that froze her blood.

She was in the cove of the timber, the shattered wagons of her father's train strewn the ground, and near her lay a long row of hideous Comanche corpses.

But it was in front of her that there was that which brought a deathly chill upon her. This was the wagon-master, Bud Blossom, bound to the wheel in the manner we have described, his features expressing the torture he endured. To the opposite wheel a teamster was also bound.

A most brutal, most fiendish-looking Indian, with ornaments of silver, and the imitation of a footprint in blood-red vermilion upon his breast, was gazing into her face, with gloating triumph, and the most hellish glee.

At a gesture from this huge savage, Pearl found herself lifted upon the axle-tree of one of the demolished wagons, and then bound to a pole, which, upon a cross-bar at its top, sustained—oh, horror of horrors!—scalps; fresh, red, and dripping with blood! While, whether she looked to the right or to the left, a face so full of agony was before and below her, quite near—the faces of those who were being tortured beyond endurance!

Their lips were cracked and bleeding, their eyes glaring, rolling, and protruding; while their muscles were strained out in great knots, and beads of agony drawn perspiration oozed from every pore, and rolled downward—all through which, the most unearthly, rasping groans issued from their throats.

Half benumbed, her brain until this having suffered and experienced such horrors as would have killed most women, or men either, had dazed poor Pearl's brain; a fact which Raybold had noticed, and wondered not that it was so, his great heart being wrung at the realization.

Pearl Pemberton had arrived at a state of mind, when nothing could further appall; but the sight of the agony of those tortured men, and the scalps of those with whom she had laughed and jested but a few hours previous, as she had also with the two unhappy survivors—all this was more than the danger and torture that had been her own.

With one wild piercing shriek, the poor girl's head fell forward upon her breast. In mercy, she had again become unconscious!

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TRIO ON THE TRAIL.

OLD ROCKY, Rattler and Paul—the latter ten times more agonized since he knew that his darling sister was really in the hands of the ruthless savages—proceeded stealthily, but quickly, to the darkest thicket, where the ranger secreted his horse. Then all at once, led by the old scout, they made their way to the huge tree, from the branches of which the latter had viewed the Comanche camp.

The war-party seemed to have forgotten that their head quarters was up the river.

Old Rocky, however, had not; and he had been constantly on the watch for a messenger from the upper camp. He felt sure that one would be sent down the river to Big Foot; if, indeed, as he feared, Colonel Pemberton had been captured.

This was why the old scout, before ascending the tree, laid his hand in caution upon the shoulder of Rattler and Paul in turn, with a low "hu-s-sh."

At the same time he whispered:

"Goze west'ard 'bout a minit!"

Although nervously impatient, in fact insanely eager to gain a view of the camp of the Comanches, Raybold bent his keen eyes in the direction indicated.

Here and there arrows and bars of moonlight shot down through the limbs and foliage; and, but a moment had the trio thus watched, when they all saw the painted face of a savage flit through one of the silvery bars.

It was but for an instant.

That, however, was enough for the old scout, and also for the ranger.

"Ther cuss air comin' ter tell Big Foot thet they've gobbled another victim fer ther tortur'! I'm takin' my biled down afferdavy on ther Alermo, 'zactly on ther spot whar Crockett spilled his bestest bleed, thet air the size o' bit! Jist linger, boyees, unt' I splits ther scarifier's weezen."

Old Rocky glided, serpent-like, from the side of his comrades, as he spoke the last word.

Both listened intently, knowing that life or death, and it might be for all, depended upon the skill of the old scout; for, should the brave

give his death-yell, the Comanches, infuriated to desperation by the slaying of such a number of their fellow-warriors by their much dreaded and detested enemy, whose mark they well knew on the slain, and who would consider his capture of more account than a score of ordinary white men, would rush directly to the spot indicated by the yell, and fight like fiends to secure all three of their foes.

Only for a moment, however, did the terrible suspense last.

Both Rattler and Paul heard a slight cracking of bushes, the violent thrashing of limbs, as of men in a terrible death conflict, followed by a gurgling sound and hoarse gasping. Then all was silent, and they felt that all was well.

The old scout had pounced upon the runner, but a few yards from the huge tree, and, soon he joined his friends with the reeking trophy of his skill and prowess.

"Now, boyees," he whispered, "lunge up'ard; an' all I bes ter tell yer air ter keep yer grip on yer vim, an' be es cool es yer kin. Ef yer gits flusterated, we-uns air ruined, an' ther leetle gal air a goner. Cl'ar heads an' quick hands may git Miss Pearl outen ther scrape, an' nothin' else kin; so keep on yer level."

"Thet's solid sense, an' yer knows hit, Rattler, by 'sperience. Glide up'ard, an' ormighly easy, fer thar's sharp years, an' plenty on 'em, 'roun' hyeraways; though I did thin 'em out, sorter some consider'ble."

Thus whispered the old scout, keeping a tight grip on the arm of each of his friends, until he had finished.

Then all stole up into the moss-draped branches of the huge tree, Old Rocky in the lead; the three making no noise, for even Paul was a practiced climber, and the knowledge that his sister was in the clutches of the red fiends was so terrible to think of that his torturing wounds were forgotten.

As for Rattler, he was almost paralyzed by this last terrible occurrence; blaming himself for having left his darling behind, when he went, in answer to her pleadings and prayers, to rescue Paul.

But it had been a necessity, nevertheless; for the ranger had left her, considering, indeed having little doubt that he would be forced to fight his way, and expecting to meet Indians on the opposite side of the river when he crossed at any point. In that case, the danger to Pearl would have been great.

In a very short space of time, our three friends were in the same position occupied a short time previously by the old scout; there being plenty of room on that side of the tree, to furnish perches for a score of men.

A low groan burst from the young ranger, and was echoed by Paul Pemberton.

"Hus-s-sh!" came from Old Rocky, in caution.

And, indeed, it needed all the powers of self-control that could be brought to bear, to view the fearful scene below them, and not fairly yell out in frantic fury, at the merciless tortures, which have already been described, of the wretched teamsters.

But there was still another sight, and one that wrung the beholders to the very soul, rendering them mad with a thirst for vengeance.

Standing on the middle portion of the axle-tree, upon the wheels of which the teamsters were bound—or, at least, upheld, in a standing position, by thongs about ankles and waist, and around her breast directly under the arms, thus binding her fast to the scalp-pole that has been described in a previous chapter—was poor Pearl Pemberton; her head sunk upon her breast, her long hair veiling her face, and reaching, in its luxuriant abundance, below her waist.

Upon either side of her was a teamster, bound, as we have seen, in a most cruel manner, to the wheels; while, over her head, dangled, slow swaying in the breeze, the scalps of the slain teamsters!

For one thing, the three horror-stricken beholders were thankful. Pearl was happily unconscious of her awful situation and surroundings. It was evident that the poor girl was insensible.

No more terrible, more heart-rending tableau could possibly be imagined.

Even Old Rocky, so long accustomed to Indian cruelty, as indeed was Rattler himself, had not expected or believed such usage was possible to one so angelic, so winning, and beautiful.

It did more to prove the merciless cruelty of Big Foot, than any previous recorded act among his many barbarities.

Rattler trembled like an aspen leaf at the touch of a human hand, and his face was corpse-like.

He ground his teeth, and tore his fingers into the bark, to retain his position on the tree.

"Easy, easy, boys!" whispered the old scout; "hit's gut ter be bored, though hit's ormighly tough, I'll swar. Dang my dorgs, an' cuss my cats, catermounts, an' wile-cats ef I doesn't leave my karkiss right hyer, afore ther smoky sons o' Satan shell tortur' thet leetle gal!"

His auditors were speechless in their agony.

"Somethin's gut ter be did, ter skeer 'em some more," he continued, after a pause, mean-

while watching the young ranger closely, and studying the emotions upon his face.

Paul now sobbed, as though his heart was broken; his fortitude having completely forsaken him, at the terrible sight of his darling sister thus situated.

"You're right, old pard," said the ranger, at last, in a husky whisper: "something must, and shall be done. I cannot endure this for any length of time, although I give you my pledge I did not expect to be tried quite so hard."

It has been mentioned that, while our friends were on the river-bank, the Comanche camp was filled with hideous howls, indicating that the savages were performing some ceremony over, or were moving, their dead.

The explanation of these howls was plainly to be seen by Old Rocky, who had taken notice of the dead, as the same lay in a line, side by side, on his previous inspection of the camp.

He now saw that the blood-smeared corpses had been placed in a circle, around the axle-tree and wheels to which the captives were bound; the feet of the dead braves were inward, their faces upturned to the sky, the silvery moon playing upon their sightless eyes with an awful effect, as viewed from the tree.

A score and more lay there, all of whom had been slain by the heroic teamsters, in their brave fight in defense of the train; when they knew that they were doomed unless, as was most improbable, help was in the vicinity.

The brave who had been slain by Paul had been found and placed with the others; but quite a space was left to be filled, and, as Old Rocky saw that more were missing than those who had been dispatched by the stampede, he had an idea where the absent ones had gone.

His suspicions were soon confirmed.

Of the main war-party, as the same charged upon the teamsters, there had been three-score. Of these, one score had been killed in the fight, and half a score more by the terrible old scout himself, when he got his "hyderphobic" up—these being the ones who were in pursuit of the herd.

A half dozen more had been sent in charge of the stampede, which would leave thirty-six dead and absent; but Old Rocky saw that ten more were missing. Where were they?

At first he believed that these were lurking in the bush, watching for himself; but he knew, after reflection, that this was not so. They had gone, he felt assured, to bring in the dead that he had slain and scalped.

Those whom Rattler had killed, including the brave whose captive Paul had been, belonged not to the same war-party, but were young braves who had been sent down to capture stragglers, or those who rode ahead of the train. The consequence was that of the main party there were left but one half of the original number, or thirty; the warrior-runner, killed by the old scout, and who was, as they supposed, conveying the news of the capture of Colonel Pemberton, belonging to the guard, or reserve, at the old camp; and Old Rocky believed that they had quite a number of extra animals there which required guarding, or else camp-equipage.

Were this not the case, it was only reasonable to suppose that Big Foot would have sent for the reserves to join him in the present camp.

It was possible, indeed, that the chief had recently done so; but certainly the messenger had not arrived at the old camp when the runner who had been slain by the old scout had left there.

Big Foot and a score of his most trusty warriors now encircled the captives and the dead, all with lance and shield in hand; proving that, although they were probably well aware that there could not possibly be more than a handful of whites who had escaped the massacre, yet these, they feared, might make a charge to recapture the prisoners.

Old Rocky was a host in himself, and he was known by the Comanches to be around and eager "fer tiz," he having already "scooped in" ten of their braves.

It was possible that they did not suppose any whites except the old scout to be in the vicinity, for the reader will remember that not one of the young braves, who were sent down the river from the main camp under Black Fox, had survived to tell their experience.

The stampede had so ground the warriors, who had been slain by Rattler at the ford when he attempted to rescue Pearl Pemberton, into the sward, that it was doubtful if anything was known as to what had become of them.

Perhaps, indeed, they were now supposed to be at the upper camp.

Old Rocky saw that, since his first inspection of the timber-cove, there had been no further work in the way of rifling the freight of the demolished wagons.

Thus positioned was the camp, but changes were soon to be rung, as the scout and the ranger knew.

These, however, will be detailed later on.

CHAPTER XIX.

PEMBERTON'S RIDE.

COLONEL PEMBERTON, his long gray-sprinkled hair disheveled, begrimed with dirt and dry

leaves and flying wildly in the breeze, his eyes glaring and fixed in a painfully staring manner ahead, his features drawn with the awful sufferings of his tortured mind—he being, as it seemed, ten years older than when he first struck the San Saba—spurred at every bound the horse of Old Rocky; the animal no longer showing lameness, as it darted up the river toward the old Comanche camp, although the rancho had not the remotest idea where the same was situated.

He had heard the old scout assert that he was sure such a camp existed; and it was now his only hope to find it, for there he expected, in his insane fancyings, to find his children, whom he had so obstinately dragged to destruction.

The loss of his wagons and property gave him not the slightest thought. If but his children could be restored to him he would be satisfied.

As has been said, his way was through the tangled undergrowth and in comparative darkness; but he rode a beast that had oft saved its master's life, and by just such a headlong dash. The animal now, as if by instinct, picked its way ahead, minding neither twitch nor pull of reins, as if it was fully aware that it had a greenhorn upon its back—as without doubt it was.

It was strange that the steed had allowed the colonel to mount it, for, to all except its master, it had ever been as furious as some untamed wild beast, panther-like in ferocity, and biting and kicking to the imminent danger of life and limb.

With that same fixed, insane stare, ever gazing ahead into the blackness—as black almost as the despair in his heart—on sped Colonel Pemberton; the horse, scenting its kind, making directly for the Comanche camp.

For some time it seemed as though the colonel expected to ride directly into the camp, without a thought that he would meet resistance; but, after a certain distance was passed, in fact as he neared the "open" which Big Foot had chosen for a halting-place, he frantically jerked his revolvers and cocked the weapons, with a new fire in his eye—a thirst for blood and revenge.

As the horse neared the camp of the Comanches, none but young braves having been left in charge, who kept no guard, and who each moment were expecting a messenger to give an account of the capture of the wagon-train; then the eyes of the steed shot fiery glances, its ears pricked forward, and snorts issued from its distended nostrils, as if the beast well knew what was ahead—well knew what was expected of it; recalling many just such daring dashes, when its skilled master was in the saddle.

As it happened, the young braves, not more than a dozen in number, and these of the lesser lights even of those who were on their first war-path, were all congregated in the middle of the "open" which has been already described when the war-party before the arrival of Black Fox were there assembled; they were now around a huge fire and were gorging themselves with the flesh of a bear they had recently killed.

They had not the slightest doubt as to the success of their chief in capturing the train, and the large number of mules, and the plunder they expected to take back to their villages—which would be the signal for a week's festivities, in which they would take an active part, and in a measure share the honors with their elders—a l this greatly elated them, made them careless and neglectful of even their usual watchfulness when on the war-path.

The extra horses and the animals which belonged to these braves and those slain by Rattler at the ford and in the cavern, some forty in number, were staked, and grazing about the "open" in a scattered manner.

Thus were affairs in the Comanche camp when, like a projectile from a catapult, Colonel Pemberton, upon the battle-mad steed of Old Rocky, shot from the undergrowth into the camp, stampeding the mustangs to right and left; the animals bounding with terrified snorts as they tore loose from their fastenings.

The young braves had heard the crashing of the horse through the undergrowth, knew there was but one animal, and of course had no suspicions that a single enemy would charge into their camp; they supposing, and with good reasons, that the rider was a messenger who had come to give news of the capture of the wagon-train, and the number of scalps that had been taken.

Consequently, as the mad colonel bounded free of the bushes, all eyes were bent upon him in eager anticipation; and never were there a more dumfounded party of red raiders than were there—each being, as it were, frozen in his tracks, actually half-paralyzed with superstitious terror, at sight of the fearful-looking visage and wild eyes of the rancho, whose teeth were set, and whose whole appearance was startling in the extreme.

So deep was his mad desire for revenge, that he did not gaze around the camp to ascertain if his darlings were there; seemingly to bear in mind that before him, stood the paint-daubed

demons, to whom he was indebted for the soul-torturing anguish he endured, and the black despair that had settled down upon him.

The lurid light of the huge camp-fire had given him warning of the presence and exact location of his hated foes, and the colonel felt that he was fully prepared for them.

Without doubt, he would have dashed headlong into that "open," in the same manner that he did on this occasion, had there been a thousand braves there assembled; would have rushed on to meet any kind of death, rather than suffer to the very depths of his soul, as he was now doing.

Straight, therefore, upon the amazed young braves, he thundered; not a sound issuing from his lips, which, to the Indians, was far more impressive than if he had uttered the most frightful yells.

With a deadly Colt's revolver in each hand, he charged upon them, and, before a single warrior could make a break for his weapons, or an attempt to escape, twin spurts of fire shot from the deadly tubes. And then, continuous was that fearful fusillade; some of the braves, with horrible death-yells, falling into the very blaze of the camp-fire.

It was neither more nor less than a perfect massacre, but one out of the dozen braves being able to escape; he darting, at the first fire, from the opposite of the camp-fire to the adjacent thickets.

Those who recovered from the superstitious terror that held them spell-bound, and ran for their lives, were followed by the horse of Old Rocky, with tremendous bounds and snorts, and wide-open mouth, and without guidance; as this strange beast had often done before, when the old scout was upon it, and they were on the "rampage."

The colonel, when he had emptied both revolvers, furiously hacked the fleeing savages with his bowie-knife.

All this occurred in less time than one would deem possible, for every nerve, and sense, and muscle, of the madman, were strained to the utmost; and, in superstitious terror, the one brave who escaped, crouched in the border of the "open," in the dense thicket, and gazed, with bated breath, and terror-bulging eyes, upon the fearful sight; thinking, beyond a doubt, that he was looking upon some demon, bent upon avenging the slaying of the whites.

Most blood-curdling were the yells of death and terror, that ruled the "open" during this terrible scene; the mustangs, the while, bounding, kangaroo-like, in a huddled mass, their ears pointed toward the fire, their wild eyes still wilder, and staring; while they trembled with fright, and would have stampeded, had it not been for the strong bands of buffalo-hide that linked their fore fetlocks together.

The high blazing fire, and the excitement produced by his mad and bloody conflict, together with the sight of the slain, rendered the old colonel fearfully demoralized; and then, as he returned his blood dripping bowie to his belt, he gave vent to his pent up rage, in yells, and whoops, and shrieks, most terrible to hear.

Cunning in his madness, he secured the horse after he had dismounted, and then followed a far different, but more horrible and revolting scene.

Bounding from the place where he had left the horse, he again jerked his knife, and hacked and yanked scalp after scalp from the heads of the slain. This was, it is probable, from his having heard Old Rocky assert, that an Indian considers it the greatest disgrace and dishonor possible, for one of their number to have his "hair lifted" after death; he being determined to do everything that was possible toward completing his vengeful work.

The bodies were also fearfully hacked by him, as if to make sure of death; and to make assurance doubly sure, he hurled one after another of the reeking corpses into the camp-fire, which soon caused a mammoth blaze, an intense heat, and a sickening odor of burning flesh, which pervaded the "open."

This was more than the surviving Comanche could endure, and he stole away, horrified and trembling, through the dark shades, and down the river; only to meet his death by Old Rocky's bowie, as we have seen, when he was on the very verge of Big Foot's camp.

The rancho's clothing hung in tatters, from his mad ride through the timber and thorny undergrowth; and he presented a truly horrible appearance after his work of butchery, being literally covered with blood. But, to make himself look even more so, the mad fancy came upon him to stain his face from one of the paint-bags, which had fallen from the belt of one of his victims.

Red, yellow, white, and black, he applied with his fingers, in stripes, across brows, and down cheek, as well as around neck in rings; and it would be impossible to conceive of a more hideous looking appearance than he presented. An Indian "Medicine-man" would have been a ball-room beauty in comparison.

Having completed his toilet he attached a lariat to the horn of the old scout's saddle, and then ran the slack to, and about, the croup of the horse, and around the opposite side of the

animal; fastening the rope to the horn again, letting it hang slightly loose along the sides and hams of the horse—the animal watching the proceeding curiously, and not in the least manifesting a disposition to either kick or bite.

To this rope, from the saddle to the croup on each side of the horse, the rancho secured the scalps he had torn from the heads of his victims all reeking; the long black hair hanging to the earth in a continuous fringe. Having yet four remaining, he attached these to the bridle-reins, two on either side.

This done, the colonel inspected the camp, and discovered several heaps of mail-bags, or buckskin saddle-bags, from which he attracted various colored feathers and other gay decorations, as well as leggins and moccasins. This caused him to remove his own clothing, and attire himself in Comanche costume throughout; afterward painting his body and arms in a fantastic manner.

Every thought of his children seemed now to be banished from his mind. His one object, since he had slain the young braves, appearing to be to make himself look as much like an Indian as was possible.

Observing the mustangs, as they were huddled together, a new idea struck him, and one which he immediately carried into effect; the scent of the paint that was upon him enabling him to do so without difficulty. This was to cut them entirely free, and at once start the animals into the thickets, toward the south plain.

In ten minutes more, Colonel Pemberton, who looked as little like himself as it was possible to make him, mounted the strangely caparisoned steed, and also proceeded through the timber to the south plain. There he drove spurs, and dashed headlong after the herd of half-wild Indian mustangs, which he drove at terrific speed over the plain, some distance from the timber, and down the river.

But the the herd proved intractable, and swerved away toward the south; the mad rancho following, himself the most hideous object under the sun. Each bound of his horse took him further away from his agonized son, and the almost equally anguished Rattler, the Ranger—from Old Rocky, and the angelic Pearl, who was then hanging senseless beneath the scalps of the slaughtered teamsters, and between two tortured human beings.

And she herself, when sense should return, would be the most tortured soul and body on earth!

CHAPTER XX.

PROLONGING THE AGONY.

THE position of our three friends, in the tree overlooking Big Foot's camp, was one of little less torture of mind than the poor captives at the wheel were suffering in body; yet both Old Rocky and Rattler knew well that any violent demonstration on their part would most certainly result in their own death or capture.

Even the murder of Pearl might be looked for in any such event.

Although this terrible tableau of torture wrung them to the very soul to look upon, yet they could not allow the slightest event to take place within the timber-cove without their knowledge, for by watching everything that occurred they might possibly detect something, which would leave an opening to their advantage and the advantage of the poor sufferers.

The agony of Bud and Jim, the teamsters, must have been more terrible than can be conceived of, for besides their torture from the tightly drawn lariats of bison-skin, and the unnatural positions in which they were bound, they suffered the tortures of the lost, from thirst, their lips being cracked, parched, and bleeding.

The watchers in the tree, even at that distance, could at times see the swollen and blackened tongues of these men dart out serpent-like to lap the blood, with insane avidity, from their lips.

This caused many a low, deep groan from our friends, who registered in their minds a fresh oath of vengeance upon the red fiends, who stood, lance in hand, below them.

Stationed as the Comanches were, around their victims, with their long, steel-pointed lances, it would have been the height of madness—even had the impatient trio had a hundred men at their command—to have attempted a rescue. Old Rocky knew this when he pounced upon Rattler, dragging him to the earth, when the young ranger had declared, in a desperate manner, his intention to rescue Pearl, by a dash into the camp by himself.

Even had the young man done this, and succeeded in freeing his darling and getting her upon his horse without injury to himself, a dozen lassoes would have brought horse, man, and maiden to the ground; and Rattler would have been added, with the most extravagant joy and triumph, to the list of victims for the torture.

In that event, his fate would have been most terrible, all the ingenuity of the vengeful Big Foot being exhausted, to inflict bodily agony upon the ranger who had slain so many of his braves.

It has been intimated, in a previous chapter, that Old Rocky felt certain a change would soon be rung in the scene below. And he was not mistaken.

Rattler knew as much, and he watched keenly the Comanche chief, who cast glances of seeming impatience in the direction of the ford, as did also several of his warriors.

Soon, along the track of the stampede, advanced a line of mustangs, each led by a brave who held the jaw-strap in one hand, and not without great difficulty steadied on the back of the animal one of the corpses of the first party of warriors, sent after the stampeding animals, and whose scalps and ears had been, in so characteristic and original a manner, forwarded to their chief.

A long line, one after another, ten in number, they advanced; the mustangs snorting and prancing, and at times bounding in affright, as the limbs of the dead, by the violent motion, struck hard against them.

It was a horrible sight!

The gory and scalplless heads, and the bloody faces, which came of the old scout's having split the noses of each, to indicate that his work was but just commenced—the severing of an ear being his usual mark when he was pursued, and by fine scouting succeeded in picking off the stragglers of the pursuing-party—were fearfully revolting to look upon.

The Comanches were well aware that Old Rocky was on the war-path; hence the careful guarding of the captives, in the absence of the ten braves, who had gone to bring in their slain comrades.

When the hideous procession entered the northern portion of the cove, the circle of warriors burst forth in weird howls, beating the earth with the butts of their lances, and laying their shields face downward upon the earth. This was to show, that it was of the dead they were striving to think, to the exclusion, for the time being, of all thoughts of war.

When the first mustang neared the uncompleted circle of corpses, which lay around the captives, a peculiar signal came from Big Foot; and four of the braves reversed lances, thrusting the points into the earth, and attaching their shields, with bows and quivers, to the central portion of the shafts.

These then sprung to the north side of the circle of warriors, to meet the new-comers; two passing on each side of the animal, and grasping the corpse, two by the arms, and two by the legs; the brave urging on the horse from under its ghastly burden, the sight of the circle of dead before it causing the beast to become almost mad with fright. Thus were the ten mustangs relieved of their loads, the scalplless corpses being placed in the circle; but leaving, at each side, a much wider space than was between the bodies. A medicine-robe was then folded, and placed so as to divide the scalplless from their more favored brothers.

The spirits of those who had lost their scalps were supposed to be hovering in the air, in torture, over their former tenements; and would, until such time as the living avenged their mutilation, when they would hasten on after their more favored brothers, on the "long dark trail," to the happy hunting-grounds.

The mustangs, which had borne the slain, were led to, and secured on, the border of the undergrowth, beneath the very covert and look-out of our friends; and then the braves returned to their comrades. No sooner had the first corpse been laid upon the earth, than every lance in the circle of braves was reversed; its point being thrust into the sward; this being intended to show that they had at length banished entirely, for the present, the thirst for the blood of their enemies, and were meditating upon the merits of, and mourning for those who were gone.

As the ten braves joined the main party, they took their places in the circle, according to rank; all uttering deep guttural howls. Then, at a signal from Big Foot which was the circling of a medicine pipe about his plumes, all squatted on the earth; the chief filling the pipe with medicine-tobacco, which is used only upon such an occasion.

"Dog gone my dorgs an' cats, an' ole palper-tator! Ef thar ain't a show ter sling my keerd, an' I'm goin' ter do hit! Thar's sperits in thar air, an' jist don't yer disremember what I as-severates.

"Keep a lookout, fer hit's goin' ter rain h'ar in big chunks, yer kin jist bet!"

Old Rocky, as he thus spoke, stole away to toward the trunk of the tree, and into the darkness; neither Rattler nor Paul making comment, their faces expressing the agony that was beyond speech, and without remedy as yet, without hope of its being banished.

Big Foot filled the medicine-pipe, which was a long-stemmed, huge affair, strangely carved, and ornamented with teeth that had been pulled from the jaws of the enemies of the Comanche tribe, while they were yet alive, and at the torture stake. This pipe was sacred, as was also the tobacco, and sacred must be the fire that ignited it—the punk taken from the medicine-bag, together with flint and steel, that had, with great ceremony, been rendered fitting to

strike the sacred fire, by the incantations of the Great Medicine-man of the Comanche tribe.

The pipe was lighted by the chief next in rank to Big Foot, the latter holding the stem in his mouth.

Then, to the four points of the compass, the chief sent puffs of smoke; passing the pipe to his next neighbor, who followed his example. As the pipe was thus passed, the last smoker bowed his head forward, gazing, with a fixed stare, at the ground.

It would seem that this would have been a favorable opportunity for a dash into the camp with a view of rescuing the captives; but, just opposite each Indian were his lance and shield, while at their backs were their bows and arrows. Besides, at the first sign of an enemy, braves, appointed for the service, would bound, knives in hand, to slay the captives, and scalp them.

The pipe had gone about half-way around the circle, the bowed heads being upon the eastern side of the same, when both Rattler and Paul, who were on the watch, saw a dark object, with a waving tail, describe an arch high up in the air, and descend with great velocity toward the strange and terrible tableau—the thing striking, with a hard thud, directly in the front, and not ten feet from Big Foot, exactly upon the spot where the chief's eyes were fixed.

This object was nothing else than the scalp of the young brave, who had held Paul Pemberton captive, whom Rattler had slain, and after whose scalp Old Rocky had waded into water.

With it, was plainly to be seen, the ear of the ill-starred Comanche; a lock of hair being run through a slit in the same, and then knotted.

But, although this was most startling, and well calculated to awaken the vengeful feeling and whoops of the savages, yet not a muscle in the stoical faces moved—not a brave moving his eyes from the spot, as the last puff of smoke left his lips.

All heard the thud upon the earth, yet none knew what had caused it, except the chief; and the same fixed stare ruled him as it did his warriors.

Those who had not smoked, gazed as they had done ever since the pipe had been lighted; that is, directly upon the face of the corpse nearest him.

The pipe continued to be passed around, but slowly.

All was still as death in the camp, except the occasional stamping of the mustangs on the border of the timber-cove.

Poor Pearl remained in the same position.

She might have been dead, for any indication there was to the contrary.

At length the medicine-pipe reached the next sub-chief to Big Foot, having passed around the circle; and he, after taking the usual puffs, laid the calumet across the knees of the Prince of the Pirates of the Plains.

All heads were now bowed.

At that instant, another of those strange objects was observed by Rattler and Paul circling high over the fiendish circle; and down it came, this time striking on the bowed head of a brave, and crashing in his skull with a fearful sound, his body falling forward upon the face, without a single outcry.

Still there was no change in those stoical faces.

All eyes were fixed as before, for it was death to him who broke the spell before the signal was given by their chief.

Had any one been perched in another tree, some fifty yards nearer the ford than that within which the two young Texans were secreted, they might have beheld the old scout, and heard him, in his usual soliloquy, interrupted by copious ejaculations of tobacco-juice.

"Dang an' double dang ther cantankerous cusses. Dog-gone ther smoky, painted, piratical sons o' Satan! Ef I doesn't let 'em know, frequent an' often, ther I'm 'roun', an' on ther buzz whiz, they'll go ter sleep; an' ther'll jist suit this hyer ole raw-hide ripper, pervidin' they'll all snooze tergether, an' don't wake up so dang'd suddint as they generally does.

"I laid one out, sorter slick, but hit war a hefty stone what I bed in thar sculp, an' I kin nigh gittin' a flip flap down ter grass, a-chuckin hit. Ef they's goin' ter hev a death dance, ther more game I furnishes fer ther funeral ther better, es hit saves 'em from bein' bothered ag'in.

"I reckon I'll glide down, an' scoot back ter ther boyees. I'm ornighly glad ther ther leetle gal hain't come back ter Texas, fer this hyer hellishness 'ud drive her plum crazy. She's got no sorter idee whar she air now. She ain't dead, thet's sartin, an' ther ole man's stock o' hope hain't run out ontill yit."

As the old scout glided down from the tree, Big Foot sprung erect, and gave a most terrific vengeful yell. Then he jerked his lance point from the sward, and kicked his shield face up.

Then, as if the yell acted upon an electric battery, which gave a powerful shock to every brave, all sprung as one to their feet, kicked shields, and jerked lances; as, from the throat of each shot simultaneously, a most fearful whoop of vengeful fury!

CHAPTER XXI.

TURTLE, THE TONKAWAY.

EVERY brave faced outward, as the terrific whoop burst from their throats, shield and lance in hand, while their snake-like eyes seemed to pierce the shades.

Yet none could tell from whence those scalps, and ears, with stone attached, had come.

Seemingly they had dropped from the skies, yet all knew that Old Rocky, the terrible avenger, the skillful white scout, whom they so feared, was at that very moment gazing upon them.

But who could tell where the old scout was?

Another brave had fallen by his hand, when engaged in the pipe ceremony for the dead.

And whose scalps were those that had fallen so strangely and awfully among them?

Certainly they did not belong to any of the war-party, who had charged the wagon-fort.

All knew that the young braves, sent down from the upper camp to capture the white squaw and those who had gone on ahead of the train, had been slain by some mysterious enemy—at least eight of them had—this having been done beyond the ford, as the party who had brought in Pearl, had discovered the remains which had been trampled by the stampede.

Four were missing, who were supposed to have captured the white squaw; yet, as she had escaped—though since recaptured—it now seemed probable that these four braves had been killed, else they would have reported to their chief.

The body of one young warrior had been found near the wagon-camp; and this left five to be accounted for; the two scalps being, probably, from two of these, left but two of the party that had come down on foot with Black Fox.

There was something mysterious about the slaying of the young braves under Black Fox; for all knew that, if Old Rocky had, with his fast-shooting guns done this, he would have scalped them. But, mutilated though their bodies had been by the hoofs, it could be seen that the scalps were still upon their heads, although the skulls had been literally smashed flat.

All this had been reported to Big Foot, and it worried him not a little, although he had quite a respectable force yet remaining.

A moment after the vengeful whoop of the Comanches, their chief gave a signal, and half a dozen braves left shield, lance, and bow, tightened their belts, drew scalping-knives and strode to the shades on each side of the timber-cove, in which they rapidly disappeared.

At the very instant when Rattler saw these braves lay aside the weapons that would have incommoded them in the thickets, he bade Paul remain where he was, and stole, with great care, down the tree to the ground.

At the foot of the tree, Rattler came upon Old Rocky, and the two grasped hands, the scout whispering:

"Cuss my cats! I war jist 'bout ter sling a whip-will signal et yer. Thar'll be red meat floatin' 'roun' hyer loose purty soon. I baited 'em with sculps an' years, an' gut ole Big Foot's hyderphobic up, es I opined I would.

"We 'uns hes gut ter thin 'em out, pard; fer they needs hit—they needs hit bad. Don't mind whether they gi'ns thar yelps or not. I'd a leetle rather they'd make a rumpus, but yer must skute like a alligator gar soon es yer hes split a palper-tator; an' don't yeou skin ahead fer I wants 'em ter know I hes a boss keerd with me.

"They doesn't know ye're byer, and we doesn't want 'em tu fer a while. Yer kin skute up, an' I'll lunge down; but giv 'em range afore jumpin' 'em—then they'll git keerless."

The only reply of the young ranger was a grating of his teeth, and a grip of the band that almost caused the old scout to yell, as the latter ended his cautions and directions.

Instantly both glided like serpents into the thickets, pointing away from the Comanche camp; neither of them making the slightest noise, any more than if they were upon the open, grass-grown plain.

No trail could be followed in that wood, except by daylight; consequently they could not be surprised, and could only be discovered by accident. When they were, if it was to be so, the discoverer would certainly be speedily launched upon the great unexplored hereafter.

Paul Pemberton kept his position in the tree, his gaze fixed, with anguish unspeakable, upon the still senseless form of his sister.

The circle of braves passed for perhaps ten minutes about the captives and the dead, then standing still and silent, and leaning upon their lances for a moment; all listening intently, in the hope of hearing the silence of the forest broken by the report of fire arms, or the victorious yell of some one of their scouts—the forlorn hope who departed—knowing that some one of their number would, without doubt, fall a victim to the terrible Old Rocky.

Both the latter and Rattler were on the west side of the timber-cove; and Paul, as a matter of course, listened, with terrible anxiety and dread apprehension, for some sounds from them and

from his sister—his only hope, if indeed there was any hope for poor Pearl.

But the first sound that broke the silence came from an unexpected quarter, namely from the east side of the timber-cove; sounds also, which proved that other enemies of the Comanches were in the vicinity—and, if enemies to these fiends, friends, of course, to himself.

But these sounds were horrible.

At first, a far-sounding and blood-curdling death-yell, which was followed by a loud, clear, and singularly intoned whoop of war; an exultation evidently, and Paul remembered hearing Rattler give that same war-whoop. Yet, he knew well that the young ranger was not on the east side of the timber-cove; nor could he get there, without being discovered by the savages, unless by making a wide detour in the direction of the ford.

The youth noticed that this whoop caused the greatest excitement among the Comanches; some of them seeming to be perfectly frantic with rage, especially their chief, who stalked back and forth, like a caged beast.

But a moment or two elapsed after the whoop from the east, when a horrible death-yell sounded from the west; and, close following this, came another.

Then, from the eastward, again sounded that strange whoop, in vengeful and triumphant intonation—a death-yell, from the same point preceding it.

Thus it went on, until Paul had counted six death-yells; then all became silent in the wood, except that the Comanches beat their shields with their fists, in their frantic rage, and thrust their lances at imaginary enemies.

It was while the youth gazed at the extravagant manifestations of rage among the red fiends below, that there came the sound of a great mass of galloping animals; and, up from the ford, over the same track that they had trampled when alarmed at the fight—all foam-covered, panting, and snorting with terror—dashed the mules and extra horses and other stock of Colonel Pemberton, urged on by the half-dozen braves who had, when first starting on their mission, captured poor Pearl, and then returned, and sped up the gulch.

Instantly the Comanches placed themselves before the circle of the slain and the captives, and, with wild yells, and pounding of shields, divided the stampede—one stream going to the right, the other to the left, and thence out upon the south plain; as so completely fagged were the beasts that they would soon stop and rest, and could then be easily collected.

The braves, who arrived with the animals, removed their saddles, and secured their mustangs to bushes at the border of the thickets. They then joined their comrades; and, it was at this moment, when all were staring at the new-comers, that, down into the midst of the warriors, dashing one to the earth with a crushed skull, fell two more of the scalps with ear attachments, and each secured to a stone nearly the size of a cocoanut.

The scouts, who had been sent out after Old Rocky and the mysterious slayer, had not returned, but the scalps and an ear of each of them had.

A perfect Gehenna of frantic rage reigned in each painted breast at this new disaster, and the most fearful yells filled the air, ringing through the timber arches, and dying away in far-off weird echoes.

Next, a crashing of bushes sounded to the east, and out darted from the bordering thickets on that side, a maddened mustang, upon the back of which—heads and feet hanging low on each side of the animal—were bound two scalpless Indians, each with the eyes dug out, and their cheeks and brows showing three parallel gashes with a knife!

Before the dumfounded and infuriated Comanches could more than realize this fresh horror, another horse with a corpse upon its back—it, too, mutilated in the same manner—shot into the camp, as once again that singularly intoned war-whoop burst forth, this time quite near the camp!

Had one been at the point in the timber from which sounded the whoop, he would have seen an Indian of most commanding appearance, tall in stature, and straight as a lance shaft, having a face which, but for the disfiguring stripes of war, must have been handsome.

The features of this brave were regular—very much so, for one of his race—his forehead was high and his form like that of an Apollo, while his movements were as graceful and as quick as those of a panther, and fully as lithe and sinewy.

Only buckskin leggings and moccasins hampered his lightning-like movements. A beaded fillet, into which were thrust three eagle-feathers, was upon his head, and partly held in place a profusion of long black hair, glossy as a raven's wing. This reached below his belt behind, and waved heavily with his every motion.

A beaded belt sustained a Colt's revolver and a long scalping-knife, while in his hand he held Sharpe's carbine and three fresh scalps.

Upon the broad breast of this brave, done in different colored pigments was the accurate imi-

tation of a turtle, the same having its head and paws extended in seeming energetic action.

After sending out his exultant and taunting war-whoop, to indicate beyond doubt to the Comanches his position, he darted toward the river, winding here and there with great rapidity, and without making the faintest noise among the limbs and bushes. At times he bent nearly to the earth or bounded high in the air to avoid obstructions.

But hardly had the whoop of this strange Indian died away—he being none other than Turtle, the Tonkaway, the well-known red pard of Old Rocky, Rattler, and other rangers and scouts—when vengeful yells of frantic rage rung from every Comanche throat, and then one single piercing signal caused every tongue to be instantly silent.

All gazed in wonder at him who had given that signal, and saw him as he there stood, his lance pointed in a significant manner toward the border of the timber, on the northwest corner of the cove.

They were all thunderstruck, and with good reason.

A more unexpected, peculiar, and horrible sight could not have been presented to the dumfounded Comanches, who even passed by the war-whoop of the Tonkaway as they gazed, spellbound, upon this latest horror.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE END OF BLACK FOX.

EVERY warrior in the Comanche camp stood spellbound, but instantly after followed, with their gaze, the direction of their chief, who stood, as if struck with superstitious awe, pointing his long lance toward the northwest portion of the timber-cove; in other words, toward the ford, and to the left of the wide trampled track of the terrific stampede.

In exactly the same position they happened to be at that instant when the crowning catastrophe suddenly threatened them, all standing in amazement and fear.

The advent of the stone-laden scalps, by which two of the braves had been killed—although all knew that these had preceded, or had been hurled, in some strange manner, by their most dreaded foe, the old scout—had greatly impressed them, and, to a certain extent, superstitiously; for it was considered very "bad medicine" for a brave to be slain when in the circle, while the medicine-pipe was ignited and being smoked.

In such a case, the mind of that warrior was supposed to be communing with the spirits of the dead before them, to learn their wishes.

It must be borne in mind that, although the scalps had all been returned, as well as the ears, still, who could tell upon what heads the same belonged?

Scalps and ears, as far as the bloody trophies would go, were laid upon the paint-daubed breasts; and, during the smoking of the medicine-pipe, some slight demonstration, in the way of whisperings from the spirits of the slain, who were hovering overhead, was expected, as to their pleasure or dissatisfaction, in connection with the disposal of the aforesaid natural head-gear.

For this reason, the whizzing of the loaded scalps had not only disturbed the spirits in the air, but had caused the death of one of their number, while the pipe was still going round.

All this, they felt, was ominous of disaster; and disaster soon followed, for the scouts that had been sent out had all given their death-yells, and the scalp of one of them had returned and crushed in, with the stone it brought, the skull of another.

Not only so, but the war-cry of one of their most dreaded and detested foes, one who affiliated with the whites—a Tonkaway—had tortured their ears; while he who sounded this taunting and vengeful whoop had slain half of the last party of scouts that had been sent out after Old Rocky.

Big Foot knew all these things, and the disasters and death that had marked the capture of the train would serve to demoralize his warriors, he himself not being free from the superstition that caused all to believe it was "bad medicine" for them on the San Saba.

Could they have taken a look into their old camp up the river, they would have been more decided in this gloomy belief.

But to return to the latest wonder.

That which all eyes now became fixed upon was evidently a human being, but no more repulsive and hideous sight in connection with the human form could well be imagined.

An Indian he certainly was, for his skin—the little that was to be seen of it—was red, the remainder of his person being much more so.

In fact, this nondescript was covered with gore from head to foot, but shreds of buckskin were left, showing that he had worn leggings and moccasins.

A terrible and gaping gash was upon his breast just below the collar-bone, which was oozing blood, and he was scratched, torn and bruised in every limb. Only once was his face to be seen. This was when the single brave had uttered his signal to draw the attention of his fellow-warriors.

One glance he had taken ahead, as if to be sure that he saw in reality the Mecca he sought—the camp of his tribe. Then his head sunk, his long hair, all matted with gore and dirt, dragged over the prairie flowers and grass as he crawled along.

But the most singular thing about this most revolting-looking being was upon his head, and resting upon the back of the same.

This was nothing less than a fine sombrero—a wide-brimmed, soft felt hat of black, the band being the stuffed skin of a rattlesnake, its eyes being represented by jewels, and its mouth prepared in a natural manner with red, a tongue darting out, and the fangs not wanting.

It was the sombrero of Rattler, the Ranger, which he had lost in the cave in his desperate fight.

And the wearer—the crawling, miserable, half-dead human—was, as the reader will have no doubt decided, Black Fox!

Tenaciously clinging to life, bringing all the fortitude and strength of will of his race to bear him up, the wretched Indian had resolved that he would not die until he had reported the massacre of his braves to his chief, and revealed to him the fact that Rattler, the Ranger, was in the vicinity, and that it was he who, singly and alone, had slain the young braves, only himself being left.

He felt it was an honor to die by the knife of such a great white chief.

His brother braves should know this.

He would tell them the white squaw was in the cavern over the river, and that Rattler lay there dead—killed by his hand.

After meeting with Old Rocky, and bearing the war-cries of Big Foot's braves, and after this the explosion, Black Fox had crawled back to the cave in search of the young ranger, to again make the attempt to scalp him; but his weakened mind caused him to think he had forgotten the exact place at which he had left the Texan's body.

However, while groping about in the darkness, he found the young man's sombrero.

This was the nearest thing to the scalp of his enemy. It was proof, convincing proof of the story he had to tell.

He could now sing his death-song, where the ears of great warriors would drink in his words.

He now made his way, tumbling, rolling and crawling, down the cliff side, and over a log below the ford which stretched across the river—a journey of death; for death he felt, and fought back at every yard he passed over.

But it was soon over. At last, before him, he saw that which he had hoped for, and fought death to see—the assembled braves of his tribe, victorious in the camp of the enemy!

Could he sing of the tortures of his journey, long would be his death-song, but this would matter less than nothing to his people; this must be hidden, although his appearance spoke louder than words of the sufferings he had undergone.

Nearer and nearer he came; but more slowly, his eyes bent upon the sward, and his head drooping.

Black Fox approached the dumfounded war-party, who all gazed in the utmost wonder.

Suddenly Big Foot strode forward to meet the startling object.

The chief had his suspicions.

The hat explained the killing of the braves in the gulch, none of whom had been scalped, or deprived of an ear.

Before reaching the miserable wretch the Comanche leader recognized him, and strode still faster, until by his side; then stooping, he raised Black Fox to his feet, sustaining him in that position.

Slowly and tremblingly the wounded brave raised his head, turning his dim eyes upon the face of the chief, when the poor wretch at once brightened, and strove to stand alone. Then jerking his scalping-knife, which he had regained, he circled the blade over his head, as, gathering all his strength, he shot out the war-cry of his tribe.

This exertion caused a spurt of blood from the wound in his breast.

A wild yell of admiration rung from the war-party—the sweetest music, to Black Fox, that he could hear.

He had been assisted to his feet by his chief, Big Foot. The assembled warriors had witnessed the act, and had welcomed him with a yell of honor.

This was more than Black Fox had hoped for, or dreamed of. It was too much for the poor wretch in his weak and forlorn condition, and he would have fallen to the earth, had not Big Foot clutched him again.

The chief now made a gesture.

Two braves stepped forward, and carried Black Fox to a central position, opposite the captives, and opposite the still drooping form of poor Pearl Pemberton.

There they set him on the sward, and propped him up with folded blankets, in a sitting posture.

Although much weaker, and ready to fall, the eyes of the young brave were open, his gaze becoming fastened upon the maiden in front of him, who was secured to the scalp-pole.

He was filled with amazement.

She was the same white squaw that he had seen in the cave in the cliff.

All around him lay the dead—his brother braves.

None attempted to take the sombrero from his head, knowing that Black Fox must have warded off death, to bring it to camp.

All had exchanged significant glances at each other, as soon as the hat had been recognized; each thrusting his fore-finger forward, and imitating the crawling of a serpent—the sign of the Snake Indians, really the Comanches, though used by but a branch of that tribe, the most northern at the time of which we write.

Big Foot waited until Black Fox had, as he thought become able to speak. Then the chief thus addressed him:

"Black Fox wear the head-dress of Rattler, the Ranger, and has felt *diablo Texano's* knife. Where is he?"

"Rattler lies in hole in rocks, over San Saba. Black Fox's tomahawk brought our enemy to the rocks. But his hand was weak, he could not bring scalp."

A tremendous and exultant yell burst from the group of warriors simultaneously, at this announcement, in which Big Foot joined.

"Where young braves?" asked the chief.

"Some in gulch, some in hole in rock—all gone on long dark trail. Black Fox soon go. See"—pointing feebly upward—"spirits of Black Fox's fathers in air. Whisper in Black Fox's ear. Black Fox must go."

With these words, the young brave began to chant, in low, feeble, and monotonous tones, his death-song; Big Foot then removing the sombrero, and casting it to the earth, with a scowl of most fiendish bate.

All folded their arms, and listened to Black Fox with solemn attention.

The young brave's death-chant was brief, but he purposely prolonged it by frequent pauses.

His deeds of war had been few.

Suddenly he ceased, and, gathering all the strength that remained in his weak frame, he sprang erect.

For a moment he stood thus, with scalping-knife circling about his hideous head. Then the war-cry burst from his lips, closely followed by the death-yell; a gush of blood starting from his breast, as he sprang into the air, and then fell dead, beside the circle of his fallen comrade braves!

As an echo to the death-cry of Black Fox, there rung, loud, free, and taunting, through the bottom-timber, the defiant whoop of Turtle, the Tonkaway.

Guttural "ughs" and "waughs" of frantic rage issued from every Comanche throat, as they gripped their weapons more tightly.

Yet, what could they do?

Not a brave who entered the timber had returned.

"Let so many"—holding up six fingers extended—"of my braves go for scalp of Rattler. Bring here the ranger. We will wash our hands in his blood. Take bows, take lance.

"It is good. Let the Tonkaway dog bark. Keep your ears on your heads. Big Foot has spoken."

Instantly the designated number of warriors darted down the track of the stampede, in the direction of the ford.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PREPARING FOR THE TORTURE.

RATTLER, the Ranger, was the first to return to Paul Pemberton in the tree, Old Rocky, however, soon following.

Rattler did not appear to Paul to be the same person whom he had first met three months ago.

The terrible events of the past few hours, the agony of soul, that the sight of the wronged and unconscious maiden and the tortured teamsters had seemed to have banished all the cheery, free, and open speech and manner which were characteristic of him.

There was a deep longing for revenge, mingled with his deathly anguish, frozen upon his handsome face that to one who had known him previously was too plainly apparent.

He seemed to have aged years in an evening.

As a matter of course, Old Rocky could not feel such deep anguish as either of his pards; but the old man was racked to the inmost soul at the situation of affairs.

Yet he knew that to express his feelings or, indeed, in any way to show the same upon his face or in his manner would but render the position of matters much worse, by causing all, himself included, to be less capable of the plans and action that were necessary to the trying occasion.

"Double me up an' dang my palperator, nerves, an' gin'ral systematic, ef things ain't workin' jubous fer ther cantankerous cusses all 'round!"

"Rattler, shakel Paul, shake! We-uns bes salerwated three more o' ther heilyuns, an' I never did feel quite so chuck-full o' glad ter hear ther yell of a ole pard, when needed, es ter hear ther Tonk spit music! Didn't yer hear him, Rattler?"

"Yes, old pard; I heard him, and I am as

rejoiced as a man can be under the circumstances.

"But even if Turtle is here, what in Heaven's name can we do to rescue that poor girl? Old Rocky, I believe I shall go stark, raving mad, if I have to look upon that scene much longer!"

"Then don't yer gaze thet-a-way, Rattler, fer hit'll rinate everythin', ef yer gits lunified. Yer'll lose yer own ha'r, an' I can't take keer o' yer, an' make ther leastest flicker toward git-ting purty Pearl out'n ther fix she's in."

"I opine poor Bud an' Jim air gone coons. I doesn't jist 'zactly see how we-uns kin snatch 'em from tortur'. Ther bestest we kin do, ef ther painted piruts starts on ther big tortur' biz, air ter put 'em outen ther misery with a blue whistler; though hit's resky, an' goes hefty ag'in' ther grain."

"One thing I'm dead sure on, an' thet air they won't tortur' purty Pearl. They'll calkerate on takin' her up-country, an' thet's whar we-uns will git a show fer ter resky her on ther trail."

"Hit's ther only chance I kin see, an' our game hyer air ter thin 'em out, which hes bin did, remarkable well, considerin'. Wa-al, I wisht some thet Tonk 'u'd show up. What in thunderation air yer gazin' et, Rattler? Dang me, ef yer ain't goin' lunified, I swar!"

The young ranger pointed to the north, along the line of timber; his eyes, as were those of Paul also, staring wildly in the extreme of astonishment.

Old Rocky followed the line of the pointed finger of his pard.

The old scout gave a squirt of tobacco-juice, viciously, in that direction; his countenance expressing the same emotions as did those of his young friends.

"Wa-al, I hopes ter be baked wi' yaller dorgs, an' fed ter Piute papposes, ef thar ain't ther same hashed-up red cuss I see'd 'cross ther drink, 'mong ther rocks—an', by ther livin' Jeruserlum, he's gut your sombrero onter his dog-goned head!"

"He war so nigh ter kickin' up an' floppin' over ter make a die o' hit, 'crost ther river, thet I let him slide when I heard ther whoopin' this-a-way. By ther bleed o' Crockett, ef ther sight o' him doesn't sorter sot back ther hull capoodle o' Big Foot's reds!"

"He's one of the party I knifed in the cave," explained Rattler; "one of those who captured poor Pearl at the ford."

"Ye're a roarin' rager, when yer gits started, pard. Yer cleaned 'em all out. I reckon he war ther last, er yer'd ha' lost yer ha'r when yer lay 'mong ther rocks, wi' ther sense knocked plum outen yer wi' ther tomahawk."

"Whar in thunderation did ther cuss cab-bidge yer cabase kiver?"

"I lost it in the cave, during the fight."

The ranger spoke as though he felt little interest in the coming of Black Fox.

"Then, by ther rompin', ragin', roarin' thunder o' Buner Vister, thet's goin' ter count toward ther thinnin' biz, er I'm a dod-gasted, slab-sided, long-eared liar!"

"Ef thet cuss doesn't think you've keeled up, an' made a die of hit, I'm a bug, an' snake-eat-in' digger! Ef he hadn't, he w'u'd ha' stayed whar he war, an' died easy-like; 'stead o' crawl-in' this fur, ter spit out his infermache. Rattler, come on! Er no—come ter medertake, I reckon yer'd better hang out hyer wi' Paul."

"Ther Tonk an' this ole raw-hide ripper kin clean out all they sends over ther drink ter fetch yer ha'r. Jist hear 'em yell! Thet proves hit."

"Thet yell ses, 'Rattler hev gone up ther spout! Hyer I goes fer more head-skinning'."

Again the old scout glided down the tree, leaving his two pards gazing down into the camp of the Comanches. But neither of them observed anything in that wild and savage scene, except that poor insensible maiden, whose protracted state of unconsciousness caused them to fear that she was dead.

And yet, as matters stood, they both felt that, were she to die as she was, without again opening her beautiful eyes, it would be a mercy.

But few strong men were ever entirely hopeless, under any circumstances; and, notwithstanding his look and manner did not show the slightest hope of having a chance to rescue the darling of his heart, still, had there not been that hope in his mind, he would have gone hopelessly mad, and dashed in among the red demons, to his death.

Very soon, however, both Paul and the Rattler were obliged to withdraw their gaze, and to reason coolly and calmly upon the situation. Both witnessed the departure of six of the braves toward the ford, and they understood how much depended upon Old Rocky, who had foreseen this, and had already departed to take measures that would prevent those warriors from ever again joining the main force.

Should the old scout meet with Turtle, the friendly Tonkaway, they felt that his task would be easily accomplished by a resort to their revolvers; and, for the report of these weapons, they listened now most anxiously.

Meanwhile Big Foot, to turn the minds of his braves from whatever of superstition or depres-

sion these strange events had evidently caused, ordered a shield to be beaten—in place of a "tum-tum"—to call all to the death dance; for he determined to place the slain in one of the caverns beyond the stream, to gather the plunder, pack the same on mules, and then proceed toward his village.

Too much time had already been lost.

The war-cry of the Tonkaway had always proved an omen of disaster to his war-party; and this, he had seen, was recalled by his braves, by their ejaculations at the time.

Instantly after the pounding upon the stiff buffalo-skin shield, the sounds made by which were dismal in the extreme, the warriors thrust their lances in the earth, in a circle around the dead and the captives; the shields, and bows with quivers, being attached to the central portion of the shaft of the lance.

Then, within this circle of weapons, the braves all bounded, and stood for a moment, facing their dead; their arms folded across their painted breasts, their faces bowed, and their eyes fixed upon the upturned faces of the slain.

The improvised "tum-tum" had ceased, and all was still as death; and death ruled there—ruled the silent, outstretched, mutilated forms; and, as far as thought went, those who were dead ruled, for the time, the living, or were supposed to do so.

Presently there sounded a single thump of the "tum-tum," and, as if all were moved by the same force at the same time, every brave faced to the right; his arms falling to his sides, as if all control of them had ceased—hanging limp, and swaying, as if the bones had been broken at the shoulder-joint. At the same instant, the straight forms bent forward; the bodies being at an almost right-angle from the hips.

Then, at another stroke of the "tum-tum," the knee joints of all became bent, when a monotonous beating was begun on the shield, and the circle of braves, in spasmodic hop, moved around the dead—a weird and guttural chant sounding from every lip, and commencing from the first bound. This chant was broken by the most hideous howls, every brave, as he reached his old position, turning toward the dead, uttering his howl, and then circling on.

Consequently, as the "tum-tum" was beat in faster time, the chant merged into one continuous series of unearthly yells.

All this time the Comanche chief stood some five paces outside of the circle of arms, his eagle eye sweeping continuously the borders of the timber-cove, and one yell from his lips would have almost instantly placed that ring of demoniac dancers in their places, with arms in hand, and ready to meet the foe.

Suddenly the wild music ceased. Every brave sprang erect, and jerked his scalping-knife, when, at a fierce war-whoop from Big Foot, all became frantic. The "tum-tum" began striking up at quick time, as fast as arms could strike; the circle of warriors struck the ground first with one foot and then with the other. Then they leaped high in the air, circling their knives above their heads, the steel glinting continuously in the firelight and the moonlight.

Throughout this fiendish fandango the warriors gesticulated wildly, first at the dead in gestures as if to draw their attention, as they uttered a guttural chant, then with fierce and vengeful yells, menacing the captives with their knives, and hacking and scalping in pantomime.

Most horrible was the sight, as were also the sounds, in that timber-cove on the Rio San Saba—that beautiful young girl, the central figure in that circle of dancing demons; those two men bound to the wheels, the raw-hide ropes cutting deep into their bare flesh, their lips cracked and swollen, as were their tongues, their breath coming and going in short and rasping gasps and moans.

These, surrounded by blood smeared, paint-daubed braves, some of them scalpsless, made up the awful tableau, which was framed in by that whirling cyclone of maddened savages. And near to this was the demolished wagon-train, the scattered goods lying around, while wild-eyed mustangs pranced about the border of the undergrowth, with fright at the terrible yells of their masters.

The towering forest-trees framed all this in, while down upon it the silvery moon smiled placidly—smiled alike upon the silent dead, the dancing demons, the agony-drawn faces of the tortured, and the bowed down form of the angelic maiden, Pearl Pemberton!

Poor girl! May Heaven help and sustain you! The efforts of brave men are as naught when that fiendish horde surround you.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE RED AND WHITE PARDS.

OLD ROCKY, after leaving his pards in the branches of the huge tree, overlooking the camp of Big Foot, proceeded, as rapidly as possible, directly toward the ford, with every expectation of meeting the Tonkaway.

Nor was the old scout mistaken in this respect; for there, in the clear space, the entrance to the ford being outlined in the bright moonlight, facing the Comanche camp as if meditat-

ing a dash into it, by the track of the stampede—there stood a horseman, three eagle-feathers flaunting above his proudly poised head.

He was mounted upon a magnificent black horse, an animal of great beauty, symmetry, and marked for speed and endurance; besides being full of fire, and vim, and electric motion, as the toss of head, flash of eye, and impatient prancing, fully proved.

Long mane, and tail wavy and inky black, a thick and wavy forelock, out from the meshes of which flashed the fiery eyes—such was the steed, and a most befitting one, of Turtle, the Tonkaway chief.

A veritable bronze prince of the plains was this Tonkaway; and, together, man and mustang made up a picture, which was at once grand, artistic, and imposing.

Notwithstanding the prancing of his horse, and Turtle's evident watchfulness of the stampede track, he noticed that a branch had moved slightly, in the undergrowth. This signal had been made purposely by the old scout, and immediately a low, bird-like whistle floated from his lips, to be promptly answered by the sharp and snarling bark of a coyote; much in the way that animal would manifest displeasure, upon being interfered with during a feast, when half famished.

The next moment, the Turtle sprang to the earth, and Old Rocky darted from the undergrowth; the knife of the Indian hissing through the air, to be buried, hilt-deep, in the sward between himself and the old scout. This, on the plains, was a token of peace.

At the same time, the Tonkaway chief stepped forward, and grasped the hand of his white pard, placing the same upon his painted breast, in token of brotherhood. The old scout imitated the action, as he said, with deep feeling:

"Dog my cats, Tonk, ef jist et this hyer pertic'lar 'casion, I hedn't ruther friz my peepers onter yeour purty pictur', than ary other slam-up, straight an' squar' human outer this hyer big ball o' dirt!"

"Dang'd ef I don't believe yer war 'speshly sent ter help this hyer ole raw-hide ripper outer a tight scrape. Ther Ole Boy's ter pay, on ther San Saba, an' no pitch hot. 'Sides thet, we-uns can't pitch inter ther condemned skunks, without 'thar gittin' ther bestest of us, by makin' mince-meat of ther purtiest piece o' female human natur' what ever wored caliker."

"Whar, in thunderation an' dangnation, did yer drap down from, Tonk?"

"Heap talk on war-path," returned Turtle, with something of reproof in his voice and manner. "Talk good for squaws. Squaws no good on San Saba. Why old white chief bring young squaw with fair face? Turtle find trail of wheel-lodges. See trail Old Rocky's horse. Think come. Have come. Turtle here. It is good."

"Dang me, ef hit ain't good! Ther old cur-nil war a cussid fool ter fotch ther leetle gal, an' I tole him so, but hit warn't no good."

"Mought es well buck ag'in' ther 'Chanted Rock, es argerfy wi' ther ole cuss. Shake ag'in, an' gi'n me a h'ist 'cross ther drink. I'll gi'n yer a leetle ha'r picnic, in 'bout three skips of a slow mule."

"Come on, Tonk! We-uns hain't gut no time ter squander. Es yer allers asserwates, heap talk no good on war-path."

Accustomed to be guided by the old scout, whenever in the company of the latter, the Tonkaway remounted, with the grace of a courtier, and Old Rocky sprang up behind him.

In five minutes more, the black steed of the Indian was secreted in a thicket, and the white and red pards were climbing the cliffs, but keeping their forms concealed from the view of any who might be below them.

Soon they arrived at the bowlder, and in a few moments had found the cave; Old Rocky having been told by Rattler, the locality of the same.

Well did the old scout know that they had no easy task before them; but, he was determined that no one who came in search of the supposed dead ranger, to secure the scalp, should return to the camp. He knew not what number would be sent; but, from the moment that Black Fox had crawled into the timber-cove with the sombrero of Rattler upon his head, Old Rocky was confident that Big Foot would immediately send a party of braves to bring in the trophy, if not the body as well, of the hated and long-feared ranger, who had slain so many of his warriors.

"Ther condemned coyotes 'll be here purty soon, I reckon, Tonk; an' we-uns must salerwate ther hull lay-out. Yer tuck three on 'em outen ther wet, what I 'ticed inter ther timber, an' I war chuck-full o' glad, ter hear yer ole familiar yelp."

"Rattler laid out some consider'ble on 'em et ther gulch an' hyer et ther cave but they kim nigh gittin' ther best on him. I've tuck a purty hefty crap o' ha'r an' years, but I sent them all in ter Big Foot, by ther way o' beads, ter let him know I'm 'roun', an' up ter biz."

"How'll we 'range things! Light up ther cave, lay outside, an' then corral 'em when they skutes in—air thet ther p'ogramme?"

"No. See light. Know enemy in cave."

Best bring dead braves out. Lay on rock, there—Old Rocky lay behind rock here, Turtle with him.

"Comanche come see braves. Go there. Can't go far. Heap big jump in river. Heap jump off shelf, in deep hole. Old Rocky crawl out then, Turtle too. Comanche corraled. Plenty moon on shelf. Dark in cave. No good light. See!"

"Dang my dorgs and cuss my cats, ef thet bein't ther game! Ye're right all through, Tonk. Yer kin bet we'll play hit, an' ter win."

Without further delay both sprang into the cave, struck a light, ignited a torch, and then carried the blood-smeared corpses of the three braves whom Rattler had killed out to and along the shelf of rock, to within ten feet of the point from which the young ranger had made his daring leap into the San Saba, to save Pearl Pemberton from drowning.

This done, the torch was extinguished, and then hurled down into the deep chasm, of which the shelf formed the top.

Then the two men crouched amid the rough rocks above the shelf, some thirty yards from the corpses of the slain; Old Rocky having, as usual, scalped and severed the ear of one, the Tonkaway taking the remaining two, and also leaving his mark.

The Comanches would not know, until the slain were examined, that they had been outwitted—that their visit had been anticipated, their most dreaded foes being, doubtless, ready to spring upon them. Let them but once pass the covert of our friends, and the savages would be effectually "corraled," as the perpendicular cliff arose to their left, proceeding toward the slain, while to their right was a tremendous chasm of great depth, and beyond the dead bodies was the steep cliff, sheer down to the river, from which Rattler had made his desperate leap.

Old Rocky and Turtle listened intently. They could hear the howls of the death-dance in Big Foot's camp beyond the river.

Soon they detected the scraping of moccasins and the rattle of trinkets, as the scalp-hunters came along the shelf to their death; although the careless way in which they advanced proved that they had no idea foes were awaiting them among the cliffs. They undoubtedly believed Old Rocky and the Tonkaway to be over the river.

It would have been unreasonable for them to have supposed otherwise.

The trail of Black Fox—a trail of blood—was plainly to be seen in the bright moonlight, and they reached the point where the rocky way allowed footing up to the cave. Every step of the way was blood-smeared, where Black Fox had crawled back and forth.

Both Old Rocky and Turtle could see that six fully-armed braves were to be vanquished by them, but they were none the less eager to open the ball. Already the Comanches were about to mount to the cave, when the "Ugh!" of one who pointed his lance along the shelf toward the river, caused the entire party to halt.

Ejaculations of surprise and suspicion followed.

All scrutinized their surroundings with keen gaze, and then, as they saw no indications of enemies, they proceeded toward their dead.

The moment they reached the slain, fierce and vengeful yells shot from their throats. But, at that instant the yells of the hindermost two were changed to death-howls, as the knives of Old Rocky and Turtle were plunged buckhorn-deep into their backs, while the war-cry of the Tonkaway sounded in their very ears.

Never were braves more dumfounded, or placed at a greater disadvantage. Their lances as well as their bows were useless. These, however, they hurled into the chasm, jerked their knives, and the four remaining braves, standing with their backs to the steep cliff, faced their dreaded foes.

There could be no retreat. Death was behind, to their right, and in front of them.

But not an instant of time did our friends give the quartette to prepare, otherwise than to cast away their lances. Both Turtle and the old scout threw their first victims aside, and bounding like panthers, the war-spirit of both to the front, and both boiling over with a hatred and fierce longing for vengeance upon their foes that bordered upon insanity.

In short, they were irresistible.

Steel clashed continuously, sparks flew, and blood spurted, the red and white pards crowding their foes to the very brink of the steep, where desperately they struggled for their lives.

Old Rocky gave a peculiar signal, and on the instant both he and Turtle sprang backward, each clutching one of the just slain braves by the belt and hair; and through the air these bodies shot, striking with terrible force in the faces of the next two who approached.

At the same moment the Tonkaway chief and the old scout darted forward, and buried their knives in the breasts of these two bewildered braves, who, with horrible yells, sprang backward, forcing the two in the rear over the steep; and living, dead and dying all shot down

in a mingled, whirling mass, tearing along upon the jagged rocks, and striking the water with fatal force and spatter as they went down into the depths!

"Dang my dorgs, an' cuss my canterlopes, ef thet warn't a slick an' neat job, Tonk!" cried Old Rocky, as he panted with exertion; "but I'm sick es a cat—sick enough ter puke up my knee-pans! 'Cos why—they're on ther second round o' ther death-dance, an' they'll be a-tor-turin' ther captives, I'm 'fear'd."

"Come on, Tonk, an' let's skip lively!"

CHAPTER XXV.

FRESH TROUBLE IN THE CAMP.

We left the young ranger and Paul when the latter portion of the death-dance was in progress. This consisted of the pantomimic appeals of the circling braves to the dead, to draw the attention of the latter, and then the mimic slaying of their enemies and the captives out of revenge for the death of those who were now lying silent and stiff before them.

The spirits of the scalped, who were supposed to be hovering overhead, were also, by comprehensive signs and gestures, called upon to witness the ceremony, which was promised to be but a preliminary of what all vowed, by the medicine-pipe, should soon follow—that is, the killing of the hated whites, who had dared disgrace Comanche braves by scalping; thus hindering them on the "long dark trail." Perhaps, indeed, it might even bar them from the gates of the great happy valley beyond the moon, where all who had fallen in battle were supposed to wander forever; where the grass is ever green, the rivers ever flow, game is plentiful, and the horses are fleet as the wind.

Most infernal was the latter portion of the dance, as the braves whirled and bounded in the air, with fast circling knives, in imaginary conflict with unseen foes; their whoops and yells of derision, vengeance and victory being simply frightful.

It was during this most devilish dance, that slowly arose the head of the wretched captive girl, her eyes wide open, fixed and staring; but without appearing to see any of the awful sights before—without appearing to hear the pandemonium of whoops and yells. Both the Rattler and Paul uttered groans of excruciating anguish.

Soon the maiden stood erect, the back of her head being firm against the scalp pole, her long hair hanging over, and veiling her shoulders and arms from view, and framing her pale but beautiful face.

Not a sign of the horror and terror that the scene was calculated to cause was manifested in her face or glance. Her eyes were fastened, in a meaningless stare, directly upon the face of the Comanche chief. It was plainly evident to her brother and the young ranger that poor Pearl had but recovered her bodily senses; that her brain was benumbed, she being, without doubt, in a semi-conscious state, and they were thankful, from the bottom of their hearts, that it was so.

As a matter of course, Big Foot and his braves supposed, indeed, they had no doubt, that the white squaw, upon recovery, would shriek with terror at her frightful surroundings and her perilous position; consequently, her strange look and manner perfectly astounded them.

The bloodthirsty and merciless Big Foot gazed, or at least, returned the gaze of his lovely and helpless captive; at first in mocking triumph and hatred, which, however, merged into actual dread and superstitious awe—that strange stare holding him, in a fascination which he had never before felt, and causing the coward blood to chill in his veins.

For full a minute he could not, for his life, move or break that gaze. He seemed rooted to the spot. His nerves were, for the time, paralyzed and rigid, beyond his control.

All this his warriors noticed, for the dance had ended at the very moment that the head of Pearl Pemberton touched the scalp pole.

"Big Medicine!"

This ejaculation ran from lip to lip, and all stared in awe at the strange and unearthly-appearing maiden.

By a powerful effort of the will Big Foot threw off the spell that bound him, and, as if ashamed of his weakness, strode quietly to the eastern side of the ring, issuing orders in a quick and peremptory manner. At once a half-dozen braves rushed for as many mustangs, leading the animals at once to the central portion of the timber-cove—the scene of the terrible tableau.

Two of these braves clutched the jaw-strings close to the muzzles of the animals, each holding fast three, and the other four, two; and thus, all four acting together, they proceeded to place upon each mustang a corpse. This was bound fast to the animals with lariats, the war-gear of each brave being secured to his body, with the exception of the lances, which were thrust in a row, closely together, in the rear of the fair captive—the points being forced into the sward.

As soon as these beasts had received their horrible and repulsive burdens, they were held fast by the armed warriors—those who had been detailed as packers hastening for more.

mustangs—and thus the work went on, until thirty-one beasts were thus laden; the animals snorting, prancing and rearing upward in frantic fright at the scent of human blood and the unaccustomed loads which had been bound upon them.

By this time Old Rocky and Turtle had returned and mounted the tree, the Tonkaway being as warmly welcomed by both Paul and Rattler as the pair could, under the sad circumstances, express themselves.

But no sooner did the old scout and Turtle discover what had been going on in the camp of Big Foot—see the mob of snorting and terrified mustangs, with their ghastly burdens—than, with ejaculations of surprise and gratification, they both hastily descended the tree, Old Rocky for once being brief in his remarks. He simply said:

"Cuss my cats, Tonk! Thar's a show fer a slam-up leetle circus, what'll count fer we-uns. Come on!"

Poor Pearl still stood, like a statue of marble, seemingly as devoid of all motion, there being nothing to show that life remained to her except the wild and insane stare, bent straight ahead, as at first; as if she was gazing beyond this earth, with its present horrors, to the great unknown.

"Paul, I can endure this no longer!" exclaimed the young ranger. "I must move, walk, act in some manner, or my brain will burst!"

"Remain here, my poor boy, and keep perfectly quiet, and as composed as you can. Thank Heaven, your poor sister does not realize her fearful position! Let us hope she may not, until we have an opportunity to rescue her. Farewell for a while!"

Paul was too much overcome with emotion to make any reply, as the Rattler stole down the tree and into the dark shades, to lead his brave steed nearer the point of action.

Both Turtle and Old Rocky proceeded, in a systematic manner, to carry out a project which they had agreed upon after reaching the foot of the tree.

A stray saddle-horse which had belonged to Bud Blossom had been discovered by them, the neck-ropes of the animal having been entangled in the undergrowth. This horse had, doubtless, darted into the shades from the stampede.

The old scout led the beast into the denser shade, to some distance from the cove; Turtle following, with several halves of lariats, which he had cut from the slack of the mustangs of the Comanches, which were secured on the border of the cove.

Soon the intentions of the pair were plainly manifest.

The three braves who had been sent to scout after Old Rocky, and who had been killed by the latter and his Toxan pard, were brought and bound fast to the horse in natural positions, one in the rear of the other, and all secured together, with pieces of deadwood between, to brace the backs of the corpses, thus causing them to have a more natural appearance, although most unnatural, repulsive, and horrible, did the trio appear, even in the semi-darkness.

Much more so would they look, when in the clear moonlight.

The ankles of the dead were bound fast beneath the belly of the mustang, and the arms of each inclosed the waist of the one in front.

The first held, or appeared to hold, the rope which Old Rocky had placed in the horse's mouth and which was tied about the under-jaw, like a bridle. As these preparations were completed, the Rattler rode up to his pards, mounted upon his superb horse; but both the scout and the Tonkaway, although considerably amazed, had recognized the ranger by his signal before he put in an appearance.

"Now, Rattler, old pard," cried the old scout, reprovingly, "jist hang fire fer a few flectin' periods, an' I sw'ar I'll perceed ter fix things so es we kin make a shut-an'-cut lunge et stompede speed ter save ther leetle gal."

"Don't worritate ther, ole man! Things air workin' moderately agreeable, an' don't push 'em, er mebbe so yer'll be ther means of purty Pearl's bein' butchered right afore our peepers, without our gittin' a show ter help her."

"Dang an' double dang ther mixed up biz! I'm purty nigh on ter bein' lunified an' I shell be ef yer goes on ther rampage, pard Rattler!"

So saying, Old Rocky tore off a prodigious chew of nigger-head.

"Rattler, he Turtle's brother. Turtle say, wait," put in the Tonkaway. "Rattler, he great warrior. Plenty fight when time come. Fight now, White Face, she lose scalp. Turtle say, Rattler wait. It is good."

"I have waited, pards, until my brain is on fire. I have looked upon that terrible sight until I am nearly insane, and I should have yelled out in madness to give vent to my feelings, had I not come down from the tree."

"I realize that your counsel is good—indeed, that there is no possible hope now for a dash to the rescue, without it being the means of condemning that poor girl to death. I'll secrete my horse nearer to the camp, and there wait, praying that some opening for us may come soon."

"I could not control myself, however, if

Pearl was conscious of her surroundings. Her shrieks would shoot through my brain like shafts of white-hot steel, and would drive all prudence from me. I will be patient, if I can, a little longer."

"Tbet's solid boss sense, Rattler! Crawl up with Paul. Ther pore boyee 'll be gittin' wild, an' he'll yell out, an' sp'ile ther bull biz."

"We-uns don't want ter hev ther hull fambly ter resky. Wonder whar in thunderation is ther ole curnil? I wish't he'd skute back with my nag, but I'm reckonin' he's tied fast up et t'other camp."

"Keep a stiff upper lip, Rattler! We're goin' ter start a circus, what may make a openin' fer biz. Tonk an' me's goin' ter break up that big funeral, what I furnished some o' ther game fer, er git bu'sted a-tryin'. Skute, an' git a front seat, Rattler; fer, by ther jumpin' Jerusalem, hit's goin' ter be a r'arin', tearin' ole sight!"

Without a word in reply, the ranger slowly rode through the dark shades, on his return. Secreting his horse, and rejoining Paul, he informed him of the latest peculiar freak of the old scout.

Both now watched the scene below, with expectation, and the beginning of hope.

They began to understand the intention of Old Rocky.

He hoped to stampede the animals of the Comanches, that had been laden with the corpses. The scene was beyond description.

The hideous, paint-daubed braves, all armed and ready for the foe, yet forced to hold in control the animals upon the backs of which were bound the blood-smear'd corpses, the mustangs plunging and rearing, and growing more frantic each moment.

Big Foot was evidently puzzled.

He could spare but few braves, to go with the slain, and those few would be in danger from the terrible avengers—Old Rocky, and Turtle, the Tonkaway!

A ring of fiendish Comanches and wild-eyed, corpse-laden mustangs, rearing and snorting around that dread torture scene, the braves being obliged to exert all their strength, to hold the frantic animals in check.

Such was the picture.

Could it be more horrible, more infernal?

Big Foot stood apart, gazing upon his camp, in apparent perplexity and anger; which emotions were doomed to sudden change—doomed to be transformed into the most intense fury, amazement, and concern, for the safety of himself and his braves.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DESPERATE AND DETERMINED.

THE indecision of the Comanche chief was of short duration, but was entirely too long, as it proved, for his good, for, out from the dark shades, shot the powerful half-breed horse of Bud Blossom, digging its hoofs into the ground, in frantic terror, snorting at every bound, its ears pricked forward, and its large eyes bulging and shining like coals of fire.

Speculations of superstitious horror and surprise burst from those of the warriors, who caught sight of the terrible spectacle; for bound upon the back of the horse, as described, were the three scalpless braves, each with one ear severed, and all bloody from knife-wounds; while a fourth was dragging on the earth behind, by a lariat which was secured to the ropes that bound the dead, and thence to the stump of the tail, where but a loose knot had been tied, which drew tighter at each bound, thus causing pain to the animal, and increasing its terror and speed.

Even Big Foot was appalled by this unexpected and horrible sight, which he knew was calculated, as were many other occurrences of the night, to utterly demoralize his braves.

Right in among the massed mustangs with their ghastly and repulsive burdens, dashed the frantic horse; the heavy load upon its back, and the drag forcing the animal to strain every muscle, while it spurned the earth with tremendous bounds.

Then followed a scene of wild commotion. Warriors were hurled to the earth, others being dragged here and there, in their herculean efforts to hold in check the mustangs. Right through the thickest portion of them broke the mad-dened horse, and then, whirling, dashed back; caring not, in its terror, to leave its kind. Thus it increased the fright of the mustangs, some of which broke loose, galloping around, and amid the others.

It seemed that it would be impossible to prevent a stampede—a stampede with the dead!

At this juncture, down from the open plain, in the clear moonlight, and into the timber-cove, yelling one minute like a fiend, and filling the air with wild and insane laughter the next—galloping at terrific speed, upon Old Rocky's horse, the animal scalp-decorated, as has been previously described—down dashed, toward the thunderstruck Comanches, Colonel Pemberton, befeathered and paint-daubed in the most fantastic manner conceivable, and waving a long lance over his head.

Down, between the timber and the Indians, he dashed, taking no notice of the terrible tab-

leau. Then, suddenly, he whirled the horse about, and poising his lance, dashed directly toward the mob of mustangs and red-skins; piercing shrieks issuing from his lips, horrible to hear, while his eyes glared with the fire of insanity, and a thirst for blood.

This fearful sight brought to the front all the superstition, which had been wavering back and forth in the minds of the braves during the night, and every one let loose his grasp upon the jaw-strap, when, thundering in a frantic stampede, filling the air with snorts of fright, away out from the camp dashed the corpse-laden mustangs; the crazed colonel close in their rear shrieking like a demon, and prodding the hind-ermost with his long lance. We may imagine the consternation.

The signal yells and whoops of Big Foot sounded amid it all, but they were unheeded.

Every brave made a break for the shelter of the wheels and axle-tree to which the captives were bound; some, in doing so, being trampled by the frantic mustangs.

This movement of the warriors was all that prevented a rescue of Pearl in the confusion; for Rattler, regardless of all warnings and pleadings to wait, sprang upon his horse, and was ready for the dash into camp.

The congregating of the Comanches around the captives, however, proved even to Rattler, that to charge into the cove would be the death-signal of the beautiful captive.

Many horrible scenes had there been enacted, during the evening and night, by that wild San Saba ford; but none were more horrible, or more calculated to demoralize the superstitious red-man than this.

Thirty-one horses, each having a dead Comanche brave bound upon its back, speeding headlong over the plain; a madman shrieking, as he followed close in the rear, his steed decorated with reeking scalps, the hair of which swept the prairie grass and flowers; while, behind this last, and struggling to keep up with him, bounded the terrified horse of Bud Blossom—three Indian corpses seated upon its back, and a fourth being dragged by a lariat in its rear, rolling and starting up in a manner terrible to look upon!

Crouching about their tortured captives, like wild beasts at bay, a circle of steel-pointed lances projecting outward, their black and snaky eyes flashing expectant glances around upon the lording shades, as if they believed some other horrible spectacle was soon to be presented to their view, or an attack having for its object a rescue—such was the next scene in the timber-cove. Even Big Foot himself was at length silent; and, although he did not betray it, he was filled with superstitious terror, especially after again, as he strove to prevent the stampede being brought under the strange influence of the straight forward, staring, and expressionless eyes of Pearl Pemberton.

Most certainly must the Comanches have thought that the "bad medicine"—the death of a brave occurring in the midst of the death-smoke—had been an omen of what had begun to work.

For some time not a sound was heard.

The wild cry of the mad ranchero sounded but faintly, and at intervals, from over the south plain.

Then some of the braves glanced toward the ford, as if expecting, after the commotion, to discover their brother braves, who had been sent out to secure the scalp of Rattler, the Ranger, returning.

But not a living, moving object was within view.

Big Foot noticed these looks, and instantly, from his throat shot a piercing and far-sounding signal yell, which all knew could be heard in the caverns of the cliffs, on the opposite side of the San Saba.

All listened intently for the reply.

The answer that sounded caused the Comanche chief to regret having given the signal.

It was the taunting, exultant, mocking war-cry of Turtle, the Tonkaway, and it came from the direction of the cliffs.

All now felt sure that they had seen the last of their brother braves, who so recently had departed, fully armed, for the scalp and body of Rattler, the Ranger.

This, again, was fearfully demoralizing.

None who had left the open of the timber-cove had returned, except the one party that had gone to bring in the dead, and those who had recovered the stampeded animals. But these had only passed through a short belt of timber, by the track of the stampede, or, it was probable that they too would have been slain.

Two thirds of the war-party that had charged, with wild whoops, down upon the wagon-fort, were now dead.

But a score, including the chief, now remained of that warlike horde.

Half the slain had lost their lives, through the cunning and skill of three men—Old Rocky, Rattler, and Turtle, the Tonkaway.

The former and the latter, the Comanches believed to be still alive; but these two, in the mode of warfare they practiced, were a lost in themselves.

Had Big Foot ordered another brave into the

shades, he—or even were a number of them sent—would have sung a death-song on the way; confident that, in some mysterious and unlooked-for manner and moment, they would receive their death-wounds.

And well knew those warriors that, at that very moment, did they not have the captives, their terrible enemies would dash upon them with their fast-shooting guns, against which they were almost powerless.

The war-cry of the Tonkaway, however, served not only to render the Comanches frantic with rage and fury, as well as a thirst for revenge; but it banished, to a certain extent, the superstition that had been born of the various startling occurrences.

Who the madman was, that had caused such terror among them, they knew not; but not a brave would have lifted a weapon against him. There had been "bad medicine" enough for one night, and such an act would have brought complete destruction upon them in some manner, they fully believed.

That this strange madman had been in the camp up the stream, and had slain some of the young braves, or that these had been killed by the terrible scouts, and afterward scalped by the madman, those who took notice of the trophies upon his horse felt assured.

This had also increased their demoralization, but the whoop of the Tonkaway rendered them desperate, and revenge was now the paramount feeling with them.

To, in a measure, satisfy that revenge, Big Foot resolved that they would now torture, to the death, the men upon the wheels.

Springing out from among his braves, the chief cried out:

"Are we coyotes, that crawl in holes when black wolves yelp? Are we squaws, that have come on war-path?"

"The Bad Spirit has sent bad medicine on our trail. Our brother braves have been blind. The knives of our enemies have found their hearts."

"The Manitou is mad at his children. He has scattered our dead on the plain. He has sent the Tonkaway to laugh at us. The great white chief, Old Rocky, cuts off our ears, for we have been deaf."

"Our squaws will laugh at us. The squaws of our dead brothers will throw mud at us, when we go back to our villages. They will say we are not warriors, but squaws."

"Tonkaways will call Comanches squaws. Apaches will call Comanches squaws. We took many mules from the white men of the wheel-lodges. Where are they? On the prairie. Our dead braves had mustangs. Where are they? On the prairie."

"Shall our dead go unburied? Shall the bad medicine drive our mustangs to the Apaches? Shall we go back to our villages with empty belts? Big Foot says, No!"

The chief brought this out in a voice of thunder.

"We are not squaws," he continued, "but warriors. Our dead shall be buried. The trail shall be wide and hard, when we drive mules and horses to our villages. Our belts shall be heavy with *diablo Texanos* scalps."

"We are few, but our war-cries will be as the thunder of the Good Spirit. The white squaw goes to our village. She is good medicine. She shall sweep the lodge of your chief."

"Let the white men die, for the moon rolls fast. Our war-whoops shall make the cheeks of *Texanos* pale. They shall hear us on the Rio Llano. Big Foot, your chief, has spoken, and his tongue is straight. It is not forked."

A wild and ringing whoop rung from every throat, as the Comanche chief ended.

Bounding forward, Big Foot then cut the thongs that bound back the heads of the teamsters over the wheels; but so long had they been kept in that painful position, the poor sufferers were unable to lift their heads to a natural one, the muscles having become stiffened beyond their control.

The chief, with a cruel blow of his great fist, knocked each head upward, when heart-rending groans were uttered by the poor wretches.

Big Foot made a hasty sign, and two braves each brought a gourd filled with water, and began slashing the liquid over the sufferers' heads. Some of the precious fluid was then poured between the cracked and swollen lips; both the men striving, with insane avidity, to swallow. But their swollen throats refused to allow more than a few drops to pass; the action of attempting to swallow racking the frames of the tortured men, and nearly throwing them into spasms.

It was a sight that was calculated to change a peace commissioner into a scalp-hunter.

The men in the tree, who were compelled to witness it, ground their teeth, trembling with the intensity of their combined pity and rage.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ON TO THE RESCUE.

KNOWING that neither Old Rocky nor Paul were provided with horses, the Tonkaway, just previous to the arrival of the crazed Colonel Pemberton, had gone in search of stray ani-

mals, that had been caught by drag-ropes and thus prevented from keeping with the stampede; and it was when on this mission that the signal-yell of Big Foot sounded, which Turtle understood, and in consequence sent back his own taunting war-whoop in reply.

The Tonkaway well knew that the corpse-laden mustangs had stampeded, but he knew nothing of the advent and departure of the mad ranchero, although he had heard the strange wild shrieks and screams from some unknown source.

Very much surprised was he in regard to these sounds.

He was unable to account for them, except by supposing that perhaps the captives were being tortured.

If this were so, matters in the cove had come to a crisis, and he was needed.

Fortunately Turtle secured a mustang, and to his astonishment, happened upon a steed that was fully equipped.

This was poor Pearl's horse.

With these two animals, the Tonkaway returned to join his pards.

To describe the amazement of our trio of friends, who were in the tree during the absence of their red comrade, when Colonel Pemberton in the condition that has been described dashed into the camp of the Comanches, would be impossible.

Disguised in paint and feathers, as well as Indian toggery, though he was, they all recognized him; and the agony of Paul was great at seeing the evident mental condition of his father.

All had expected to see the colonel dash up to Pearl and endeavor to release her, but he had not seemed even to notice his daughter, appearing to be entirely bent upon stampeding the corpse-laden mustangs, and creating as much noise and confusion as was possible. He made no hostile demonstration toward the Comanches; in fact, he seemed to repudiate their presence.

Fully as lost to his natural heart's promptings the ranchero appeared to have been, as was Pearl to her natural fears and correct understanding. But there was a change in the camp.

Again the captives were surrounded, some twenty paces from the wheels and axle-tree, by a circle of lances, the points being thrust into the earth, and shields, quivers and bows hanging from the shafts; ready, however, to be clutched at an instant's notice.

"Cuss my cats, ef I kin stan' any more hellishness!" exclaimed the old scout, squirting tobacco-juice most viciously. "Es ter suttin' hyer an' gazin' et ther cantankerous smoky sons o' Satan while they scarifies Bub and Jim, I ain't goin' ter do bit!"

"I'll go an' crawl inter a hole in ther rocks, t'other side ther drink, fu'st. But what in thunderation's ter be did, Tonk? What d'yer 'vise, Rattler? Dang ef I ain't gittin' b'ilin' chuck over w' pure double-distilled hyderphobic mad! Fightin' indig' air runnin' on a stomped, clean from the ruts o' my ha'r ter my toe-nails!"

"If I thought we could break through them, and get to poor Pearl before any of those murderous miscreants could kill her, I would not hesitate a single instant," returned the ranger, his eyes with an expression that was unutterable in its agony; "but that seems impossible. To break cover would, I fear, be her death-signal."

"The eyes of my white brothers have been blind," asserted Turtle, with firm decision. "The knives of the Comanches will not be stained with the blood of White Face."

"What do you mean, Turtle?" demanded Rattler, the relief and joy in his glance proving how fully he believed in the Tonkaway's knowledge and sound judgment.

"Ya-as," put in Old Rocky, in some excitement; "spit her out ornighly suddint-like, Tonk! What in thunderation hev yer gut inter yer noddle, creepin' 'roun' under the ruts o' yer ha'r! Shoot off tongue lively, fur I'm tortur'd bad!"

"White Face, she Big Medicine! Great Spirit speak in her eye. Make Comanche 'fraid. Big Foot heap scare when look in White Face eyes; eyes of White Face look straight."

"No see Bud. No see Jim. No see colonel, when ride in all paint. No hear whoops. No see stampede with dead braves."

"Why? White Face look in spirit-land. Comanche know hand of Good Spirit on White Face head. Big Medicine. No dare hurt."

"If hurt, no rain fall. Buffalo all run fast to land where white rain fall. Turtle is a Tonkaway chief. His eyes open, ears open on war-trail. Turtle has spoken. Lies build not nests on his tongue."

"Dang my dorgs, Tonk, shake! Yer has spit out ther fu'st comfort lingo I hes heard since we struck San Saba. Dang an' double-dang hit, ef yer doesn't sling stud-horse sense, too; an' I goes hefty enough on yer say-so, ter lunge in, ef so be ther Texas Rattler 'grees ter stan' ther rifle! What yer say, pard?"

"You must be right, Turtle. I noticed, too, the strange influence that Pearl's manner and

appearance had upon Big Foot and his braves. We will dash in upon the demons, and might will be upon the side of right."

Paul Pemberton crawled along the branch, and put his hand in that of the Tonkaway, who stared at the trembling youth for a moment with something like contempt, and then said:

"Young white brave like squaw. Eye rain on cheeks, where war-paint on warrior. Eye-rain good for sick squaw."

"Let him alone, Tonk!" said Old Rocky, rather indignantly. "Thet's his sister—what's tied ter ther scalp-pole, an' hit war his dad what stomped in, roarin', ragin' hyderphobic."

"He's killed one Curmanch', an' bin tortur'd by another. We-uns reskied him 'fore yer 'roved. He's game clean ter ther back-bone, but he can't stan' everything, not quite!"

Instantly, upon these words, the Tonkaway placed the youth's hand upon his breast, saying:

"Turtle heart warm for young white brave. Tongue cold, hard, on war-path. Want scalp. Want hear Comanche death-howl!"

"Turtle friend, brother to young white brave. It is good. Come! War-path open. War-cry on Turtle's lips. Come!"

One glance below them now showed that the Comanches were once more circling, in a torture-dance, their knives in their hands, while the most bloodthirsty yells filled the air.

Clearly there was no time to be lost!

The wretched captives were about to be scarified with the knives and arrow-points of the fiendish horde.

Poor Pearl remained in the same condition as before.

Both the young ranger and the Tonkaway were soon mounted upon their well-ried steeds.

The old scout, however, continued, cursing, chewing, and spitting, for some little time, around the half-wild mustang, before he could mount it; he being bare-back, with but the Indian jaw-trap for a bridle, which placed him at a disadvantage.

Paul, although he had been ordered to remain in the shades—in fact, the Texas Rattler and Old Rocky pleaded with the youth not to accompany them—refused to listen. He sprung upon poor Pearl's horse, vowing that he would have a hand in his sister's rescue, if he lost his life in the attempt.

"Now, pards," said the young ranger, in a deep, stern voice, as he examined his revolvers, "we must arrange our mode of action beforehand. It will be best for all, except myself, to everlastingly pop into the red torturers, while I dash directly to the side of Pearl, cut her loose, and make a break into the shades across the cove."

"Turtle can do his best to save Jim, and you Rocky, go for Bud Blossom; although I don't believe you can get the helpless captives up before you on your horses, and escape with them. The poor fellows will be as limp as wet buck-skin."

"Thar won't be no use tryin' ter resky ther boyees," said the old scout; "fer ther red hell-yuns will jab 'em w' thar stickers, the fu'st thing arter gittin' a peep et we-uns. But we'll pervent 'em havin' ter die by inches, w' tortur'; which, I knows, they'll thank us for."

"Come on then! Let every man do his best; and, you Paul, keep along by my side, but not near enough to hinder me, when we get near the captives. Just one dash! Do all you can in a minute, boys; and then spur for cover, on the other side of the cove, or we'll all be killed. Are you ready?"

"All sot, Rattler! Skute, an' chuck lead inter red meat every time!"

"Turtle is ready," was the laconic reply of the Tonkaway.

Paul gathered the bridle-reins, and then all, with revolvers in hand ready, walked their horses slowly toward the undergrowth, which bordered the timber-cove and the camp of the Comanches.

Two more superb specimens of men and horses, than Turtle and Rattler upon their steeds, were rarely to be met with.

They were like two thunderbolts, when it came to a charge; especially when nerved by the object in view.

Chewing his "nigger-head" vigorously, the old scout muttered deep curses, as his restive mustang danced about, maddened at control. This promised well for the dash upon its recent masters.

Upon coming within a few feet of the border of the undergrowth, all halted, and ranged themselves neck and neck.

The fierce yells of the Indians, and the rage into which they had worked themselves, prevented the latter from hearing the crashing of bushes.

"Spur, pards! Spur for life, or death!"

Thus cried out the young ranger; and, as the last word left his lips, every one jabbed spurs rowel deep; the horses, with grunts and snorts of pain, shooting in tremendous bounds through the screen of branch and bush, into the bright moonlight.

Like arrows, the spur maddened steeds shot across the intervening space; but the snake-like eyes of the Comanches discovered their

hated foes, and that before our friends had reached the circle of lances and other weapons.

With terrific whoops of war, the Indians darted for their arrows; but, like an avalanche, those four horses dashed upon them, while continuous spurts of fire shot from the deadly tubes, and bullets tore through the painted breasts.

Death-yells filled the air, mingled with whoops of war and rallying cries.

It was a terrible charge!

Directly over living, dying, and dead, dashed the invincible scouts; the war-cry of the Tonkaway rising above the din.

All the Comanches rushed at once between the captives and their enemies; but, at a yell from their chief, two darted back, and buried their knives in the breasts of the teamsters, Bud and Jim. The heads of the poor men fell forward, the blood gushing from their gaping wounds!

Their terrible torture was at an end.

Amid that mob of demons, our friends found that all they could do was to shoot down those who clutched at their bridle-reins, or who attempted to pull them from their steeds.

Knives flashed on every side. Fire spurted through the powder smoke. A perfect vocal and optical pandemonium reigned in the cove.

Rattler gave a signal-yell, for all to spur from the mass, and make their escape.

To linger was certain death.

Their revolvers were now empty.

Then it was, that, for the first time, the young ranger was enabled to jump his horse to the scene of torture—the wheels and axle-tree.

The scalp-pole stood bare before him.

Pearl Pemberton, his darling, was gone!

It almost seemed that she had vanished, in a moment, into the air.

So thought the old scout.

The young ranger was fairly dazed with an anguish which would have proved his death, had not the yell of Old Rocky quickly aroused him.

Rattler struck down a savage with his empty revolver, but the knife of the Indian entered the flesh of his horse.

It was that, doubtless, which saved him.

The steed bounded madly from out the circle of lances.

One glance, guided by another yell from the old scout, and the whoops of the Tonkaway, showed the ranger his three pards dashing away.

It showed him something more.

Big Foot, with Pearl in his arms, was just darting into the undergrowth upon a fleet horse, on the opposite side of the cove of timber.

Amid a cloud of arrows, Rattler dashed wildly from the Comanche camp; and on after his friends to the rescue of the Pearl of the Prairie, who seemed now to be really doomed.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FRESH MYSTERY.

AFTER the headlong departure, or retreat, of our friends—not one of whom had escaped being wounded by the knives of the Indians—after the mad dash was over, nearly half of the savages were either dead or wounded; and, had it not been for the fear of shooting Pearl, many more would have been made to bite the dust.

All had occurred in a few moments, and never were red-men more dumfounded; not only at the charge of the little band upon them, but at the death which followed, and the flight of their chief with the captive maiden. They began to think that the latter must be "bad medicine," as little besides death had followed since her capture.

One asserted that he had heard Big Foot utter a signal-yell for them to follow, and all prepared, without a thought of dead or wounded, to dash away from the spot, which had, indeed, proved "bad medicine" to them. Springing upon their mustangs, but half a score of the but recently strong war-party of Big Foot dashed from the timber-cove, and out upon the moonlit plain.

There they saw a sight that did not lessen their conviction, that "bad medicine" for them permeated the very air around the San Saba.

This was nothing else than the mad colonel, galloping wildly over the plain, yelling like a demon; while, in front of him, sped the affrighted corpse-laden mustangs of the Comanches.

Every brave jerked jaw-strap, and gazed, with superstitious awe and dread, first at the scene upon the plain, and then at each other, ejaculations, in consonance with their emotions, bursting from their lips.

But, soon they caught a view of a moving object, down the river, just darting from the timber, as they looked in that direction.

This was Big Foot, with poor Pearl in his arms, and mounted upon the horse of a United States Army officer, which had been captured in a previous raid.

The chief perceived his warriors, and signaled with his hand for them to join him.

All lashed their mustangs onward to join their leader, but a long distance intervened.

Straight out on the plain, for about two

miles, Big Foot sped, and then turned to the west, and parallel with the Rio San Saba.

But, on dashed the thundering stampede, with the crazed ranchero in their rear; and, before the Comanches had covered half the distance between themselves and their chief, the animals were turned directly toward them.

With horror and dread at this rush upon them of their dead brother braves—which they began to believe must have been taken possession of by bad spirits—all turned westward, chief and braves riding parallel with the river; the latter a mile distant from the same, the former two miles. Then, out from the timber, and down the river, on the trail of Big Foot broke our valiant quartette; the strange sight we have but attempted to describe, meeting their gaze, and causing great astonishment.

Poor Pearl Pemberton seemed further from their power to rescue each moment, but on they sped headlong, in pursuit. Paul left his pards, and started to join his father, in the hope that he might be able to influence the colonel to accompany; trusting that, tortured though his brain was, his father would recognize him.

Thus, out upon that stage, that broad, open, moonlit plain, the strange actors strove to overtake each other. And, to torture our friends yet the more; the pursuers saw that the unhappy maiden had recovered—that she now realized her awful position—for, her arms bent the air wildly, around the plumed head of Big Foot, while, even at that distance, her shrieks could be faintly heard.

Suddenly the mad ranchero appeared, for the first time, to catch sight of the fast-galloping Comanche chief; perhaps drawn to this discovery by the cries of his daughter, he being nearer to Big Foot than were any of the others.

It may have been that there was a faint ray of intelligence, which darted into his distorted mind, born of that struggling female figure in the arms of the savage chief; or, perhaps, the cries that proceeded from Pearl caused glimmerings of the near past to crowd in, among the wild whirlpool of insane thoughts that had so long had possession of him.

Be this as it may, Colonel Pemberton headed his horse in hot pursuit of the Comanche chief, which fact caused the warriors who had turned in a quartering course toward Big Foot, to return to their former course, through dread of the fearful-looking madman, upon whose head the Good Spirit or the Bad Spirit—one or the other—had placed his hand, thus putting him beyond all harm from his enemies.

Until almost directly in line of his old camp, Big Foot kept on with his fair captive. Then he suddenly turned, and, as if he expected that some of his young braves yet held the camp, he dashed toward the timber, soon disappearing from view.

This change, of course, gave an advantage to the warriors, whose quirts were kept constantly hissing through the air, and about the hams of their mustangs. They also quickly quartered toward the old camp, soon darting at headlong speed into the dark shades, and leaving the plain to our friends, who spurred madly on; hope nearly vanished from their breasts.

Far ahead of Rattler, Old Rocky and Turtle galloped the colonel, his yells no longer to be heard, and he no longer gesticulating in his former wild manner. Then Paul once more rejoined his friends, but not one of them had a word of encouragement for him.

Indeed, there was now little ground for hope, even if Pearl was safe, as far as being harmed bodily by the Comanche chief; for she was being carried to a fate worse than death, as it was evident that Big Foot had given up all hope of gaining revenge for his lost braves, or even of retaining the mules, horses and plunder that he had captured.

Plainly, his intention was to strike toward his village, at the head-waters of the Rio Brazos.

Did he thus desert his warriors—those who remained alive—as seemed to be his intention, then it would be almost impossible to overtake him by trailing, as, without doubt, he intended to keep in the timber.

It was no wonder, after these reasonings, that the pursuers almost despaired of success. Their hearts were doubly wrung with anguish when they perceived that the poor maiden had fully recovered, and now realized her awful position.

Rattler ground his teeth in a fury that bordered upon frenzy as the chief disappeared in the shades with his darling—all he prized in life.

Without her the world would be a blank; indeed, he felt that life would be one ceaseless torture, did he lose Pearl.

Proud and defiant and filled with contempt and hatred, were the mien and glance of Turtle, the Tonkaway, as he gazed at the Comanche chief when the latter shot into the shades. Then the friendly Indian looked into the faces of his white pards, there detecting their hopelessness and anguish.

Raising his right hand, in a graceful and sweeping gesture toward the point at which the chief had disappeared, the Tonkaway spoke:

"The hearts of my white brothers are sad, when the war-path is thick with dead Snakes.

The Comanches are dogs. Tonkaway squaws can teach them war. White Face is in the arms of Big Foot, but Turtle will take her from him. I have spoken."

"Dang an' double-dang my hull systematics, Tonk, ef I doesn't think yer'll hev a o'mighty long trail arter poor Pearl this time! Hit 'pears es though ther cantankerous cuss war 'bout ter p'int up country, an' keep in ther timmer et thet, which'll gi'n him ther 'vantage all 'roun'."

"What d'yer think, Rattler?"

"Don't ask me, old pard—don't ask me! I cannot even think. I have got beyond that, and see but little hope. That demon will murder poor Pearl if we crowd him. He is frantic with rage at the disaster and defeat he has met with; and, since Pearl has recovered her senses, the superstitious awe which she caused in the murderous breasts of those fiends will be dispelled. I see little hope, and I very much fear that the colonel will but hasten the fate of his daughter."

Colonel Pemberton was, at this time, some distance in the rear of the warriors, and the scouts were fully a quarter of a mile in the rear of the colonel.

As has been mentioned, not one of the friends had escaped the knives of the infuriated Comanches at the timber-cove; and, although each had lost considerable blood, they thought not of their wounds, having bandaged each other while on the verge of the timber, after following Big Foot through the same, and realizing, after discovering him upon the plain, that it would be impossible to overtake him.

By various windings in his course, the chief had gained greatly the advantage of his pursuers, they being obliged to follow his trail.

On they all galloped, their horses foam-flecked and panting.

The ranchero soon disappeared from their view, and Paul groaned aloud. The poor youth had now little hope of ever again seeing his father and sister.

All expected to hear the war-whoop soon after the colonel entered the shades, having little doubt that the Comanches would ambush him. But no sounds reached their ears. Perhaps the warriors were crouched among the bushes, with the intention of ambushing the scouts, and therefore they had permitted the ranchero to pass them unmolested.

Thus thought and reasoned Rattler.

"Jerk sizes, boyees!" cried the old scout, "an' bore ther carkisses of every red heathun what yer kin friz yer peepers onter! I 'lows they bees 'bout es mad es a screamin' eagle arter bein' struck by a norther an' hevin' his tail-feathers blowed out."

"Cuss my cats, ef I ain't sick—bilious clean through, from ha'r to heel! I wish't I war decently defuncted, es Joe Booth used ter spit out when a blizzard struck our outfit."

"Rattler, keep yer grip! I'm 'pendin' on ther Tonk now. I'm plumb out'n this byer game; fer, though we've swep' ther board purty clean, leetle Pearl air yet in ther hands o' ther hell-yuns."

"Hit seems es though this hyer y'arth ain't run 'zactly on ther squar', er else ther hull on us hes gone lunified, dang ef I knows which!"

"Hu-s-s-sh!" came from the lips of the Tonkaway, as he shot into the timber in the track of the Comanches, his revolver cocked and ready. All followed, but soon checked the speed of their horses, for, at a little distance ahead, they caught the flicker of fire-light.

The huge fire, fed by the mad colonel with the corpses of the Comanches, still burned brightly, throwing out the scent of scorched meat to a sickening degree; huge logs having formed a foundation for the all-night fire of the young braves, who little dreamed when they started it that their own bodies were destined to feed its flames.

There was no ambush, nor any signs of the foe; and our friends pushed on, all four of them breaking into the "open" at the same time, with their revolvers presented.

A strange and unexpected scene met their view—a scene that dumfounded and puzzled all except the Tonkaway. There, before their eyes, scattered around the "open," and plainly revealed in the blaze of fire, were the horses of the Comanches, including the animal of Big Foot—all dead, or dying, a long lance being thrust through the vitals of each horse and the weapon left in the wound.

Not a saddle, nor a jaw-strap had been removed.

It was apparent that the Indians had sprung from their mustangs, and then, at the order of their chief, had lanced them.

What did this mean?

Neither Old Rocky nor Rattler, experienced as they were in border-life, could give an explanation of this mystery.

Colonel Pemberton then rode into view from the opposite side of the fire.

A great change had come over him.

He had resumed his own garments and thrown aside his Indian habiliments.

The scalps were also gone from his horse.

With the exception of the remaining daubs of paint, he appeared like himself, having evident-

ly recovered to a certain extent his mental balance.

He urged his steed to the side of Paul's animal, and both alighted, the ranchero exclaiming:

"Thank Heaven! I see you once more, my son! I have been mad, I believe—stark, staring mad! Where, where is my darling Pearl?"

"Dang glad ter see yer skute 'roun' ter reg'lar biz, curnil," cried out the old scout, with relief and pleasure. "What's bin goin' on hyer? Yer 'roved hyer fu'st. Did yer git a peep at ther red beathun er ther leetle gal?"

"No, Old Rocky! There was not one of the red demons to be seen when I reached this 'open,' but these horses were all struggling in death. Their owners could not have been long gone."

"Dod gast all sich doin's! Dang me, ef I doesn't b'lieve this hyer big ball o' dirt air goin' ter smash, an' we'll hear Gabri'l's horn toot afore sun-up! Purty Pearl air a goner, I reckon. Big Foot hev gut her fer keeps, er I'm a dod-rotted Digger from Diggertown."

All stood, staring at the undreamed-of spectacle.

Where were the Comanches?

Why had they slain their mustangs?

Where were Big Foot and his fair captive?

These were difficult questions to answer.

One thing was certain.

Pearl was gone. She had vanished, as had her captors.

Would she ever again meet the view of her friends?

This was now the mental question of all.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE TONKAWAY READS THE RIDDLE.

No wonder was it that our friends were amazed and puzzled.

Why had the Comanches slain their animals, leaving jaw straps, saddles and even their lances? The latter, however, being used on horseback, would be useless after the mustangs had been killed.

Why had the Comanches cut themselves off entirely from returning to their far-away villages, placing themselves on foot in a hostile section of the State.

They were "horse Indians," yet when on the war-path had deliberately slain the animals which might have borne them in safety to their village, could they but escape the terrible avengers; and there was a favorable opportunity for them to do so, by keeping in the shades and following the river toward its head.

The young scout grasped the hand of the colonel, who was still a most pitiable object to look upon. Under any other circumstances, his appearance would have excited uncontrollable laughter. But words were tame, idle, and useless to express the emotions of each.

Even Old Rocky and Turtle merely shook the hand of the but recently frantic madman, who was far from being equally balanced in mind even yet.

The horse of the old scout walked up at once to its old master, and with a neigh of pleasure and recognition, rubbed its muzzle against the arm of Old Rocky.

Turtle urged his own noble black steed to one side and then halted, gazing proudly and with some disdain upon his white friends, who had expressed their amazement at the scene before them. If it was a puzzle to them, it did not appear to be to the Tonkaway.

There was not the slightest surprise expressed upon the stoical features of the friendly Indian. His face expressed nothing of the thoughts that ruled him.

The greetings of the men had passed in a few moments. The situation admitted not of delay. Pearl Pemberton was in deadly danger, suffering tortures of mind since her recovery that would, if protracted, drive her insane.

This they all knew.

But the Texas Rattler was lost, mentally considered.

The last ray of hope seemed to have been banished from the young ranger's breast. His very vision was dim, from the anguish that racked his brain.

The old scout, too, was as much astounded as he could possibly be. The sight of the slaughtered mustangs was, even to him, a most puzzling and unaccountable mystery. Had not his mind been so tortured, from the great strain upon it, occasioned by the cries and appealing gestures of Pearl; as, in the arms of Big Foot, she was borne, at terrific speed, over the plain, then to disappear in the shades, he might have been able to interpret the situation.

As it was, he was as deep in the fog, as was the young ranger.

"Cuss my condemned catermounts, an' condense ther consternation, ter fit this hyer case! I'm plum ag'in' a stump, Tonk an' Rattler; an' I ain't 'shamed ter own up, fa'r an' squar'. This hev bin ther wustest, mixed-up, conglomerated, twisted, turned, an' screwed mess o' cussedness, I ever war chucked inter without warnin'!"

"I hopes ter be nibbled ter death by dipper-ducks, ef I kin make head er tail o' things; 'ceptin' thet purty Pearl air 'bout es nigh bein' a goner es any piece o' human natur' ever war."

"What does this hyer mean, Tonk? What did ther hellyuns jab thar lances inter thar critters fer? I'd like ormighy well ter know, an' I opine yer kin sorter 'splain matters, ef yer want. Spit her out, lively! Fer ther leetle gal air sufferin' all ther tortur's ther cantankerous smoky sons o' Satan kin pile on."

"The eyes of my white brothers are blind with grief. Look! It is plain to the eyes of Turtle,"—pointing to the dead mustangs.

"When Big Foot left his camp with White Face, he yell for his braves. Think go on war-path for scalp. Have revenge for dead braves. When ride out on plain, see warriors few. Many sound death-yell in wheel-lodge camp."

"See can't go down Llano. See all same can't go back to village. Squaws hoot, pelt with mud, throw stones at Big Foot and braves. Say, where war-party? Where horses? Where scalps of white men? Say, Big Foot he squaw."

"Big Foot know this. Say to braves, kill mustangs. Leave lance. Then come in woods. Say, fight till die. Better die with bow in hand, on war-path. No go back to village. Death is better."

"So, kill mustangs. Go in wood. Make blind trail. Wait in bush. Wait in rocks. Hide. Then shoot Old Rocky, shoot Turtle, shoot White Chief, shoot young brave."

"Big Foot say this good. Warrior say this good. See lance. See dead mustang. See talk plain to Turtle. Turtle has spoken. Lies build not nests on his tongue."

"Dang an' double dang my ole palpertator, ef ther Tonk ain't kerrect, Rattler! Fac' air, he allers bees kerrect. We-uns hev gut some fine scoutin' ahead, er I'm a bug-eatin' Piute!"

"Let's hide our nags, spread, an' gaze keen fer 'sign.' Thet's ther p'ogramme, boyees. Never say, gi'n up! We'll hev Miss Pearl outen ther red rapskillions' clutches yet, er I'm a Greaser!"

"Turtle," said the young ranger, as he spurred to the side of the chief, "you have again given me hope. Nothing could be more cheering than the interpretation you have given. I am convinced that you are right. Let us begin our search at once. Your keen eyes may, even by moonlight, detect sufficient 'sign' to betray the course of the Comanches."

Both the colonel and his son grasped a hand of the Tonkaway, but he appeared not to notice them.

Turtle was working out a problem—placing himself in the same position that Big Foot occupied, and taking into consideration the superstitions, manners, customs and beliefs of the foe.

Suddenly he whirled his horse, and waving his hand, said laconically:

"Come! War-trail open."

All followed the chief, who urged his horse into the undergrowth on the east side of the "open."

Proceeding a few yards, the Tonkaway turned abruptly toward the plain until he reached the dense shades upon the very verge of the bottom-timber. Here he sprung to the ground, slipped the bridle, loosened the girth, and secured his horse to a limb by the neck rope. The others followed his example.

Colonel Pemberton had delivered to Old Rocky the latter's horse, no apology being needed for his appropriation of the animal.

"Come!" said Turtle. "Hide guns; mebbe so crawl like snakes; no want guns. Come!"

The rifles were secreted, and then, in single file, led by Turtle, our friends stole with great caution through the shades down the river.

A serpentine way it was, winding here and there to avoid the denser thickets, and the more open portions of the timber, where bars of moonlight shot downward through the foliage.

On and on they proceeded, Paul dragging his weary feet after him, hardly able to keep his father in view, who, just ahead, seemed to be again plunged into a despondency so deep that he was not conscious of the presence of his son.

At length the youth lost sight of those ahead, and wandered on aimlessly, at length reaching the same little "open" where he had been stretched and bound by his Indian captor.

Prostrated with hunger, fatigue and loss of sleep, Paul threw himself upon the earth. Before him, beyond the river, was the black opening in the cliff, from which his sister had plunged into the water.

Paul knew that she had made that plunge in her anguish at discovering him in the torturing position in which he had been—the Indian dancing around him.

All the thousand and one kindnesses and proofs of sisterly affection shown him by Pearl since his childhood, passed through the youth's mind.

He fell backward upon the sward, and sobbed himself to sleep—a sleep that was most profound—with an arm thrown out upon either side, unconsciously taking the same position, and in the same spot, that he had occupied when bound by the Indian.

Not until the others had reached the foot of the huge tree, within the branches of which the Rattler and Paul had suffered such agony at the

torture-scene below them—not until then did they miss the youth. The colonel, suddenly aroused, became again frantic at his son's absence.

"Dog-gone hit, curnil! Yer orter kep' a holt o' ther boyee," said the old scout. "He war 'bout fagged out when I noticed him last. But he's all hunk—bet yer life—an' hit's better es hit is. He's drapped into some bunch o' bush, an' be air asleep. He needs hit, an' we kin find him easy 'nough arter awhile."

"Thar's no danger o' ther reds findin' o' him. They hes gut somethin' else in the'r catases."

As Old Rocky ceased speaking in his low, grumbling voice, Turtle strode to the side of the trio; he having been to the border of the undergrowth, to peer out into the timber-cove.

The Tonkaway gave a "waugh" of mingled anger and dissatisfaction, and then said:

"Come!"

All followed him to the border of the bushes, knowing that some other strange event had occurred.

"See!" directed Turtle, pointing through the fringe of bushes.

There, before them, were the demolished wagons, and the scattered goods.

There also were the wheels and axle-tree, and the scalp-pole.

There, likewise, were the corpses of Bud and Jim.

But, how changed was the scene!

The scalps no longer fluttered from the cross-bar on the pole. The teamsters had been scalped, and were backed and mutilated beyond recognition.

And, around that torture-circle, which, but a short time previous, was strewn with dead, all was now clear and vacant.

Not a corpse, except those of the butchered teamsters was to be seen.

"What say? Turtle tongue straight. No see 'sign' in wood. Follow trail in air. It is good. Big Foot he come back for scalps. Take dead braves over river. No want scalps hang in Tonkaway belt."

"Wa-al, dang an' double dang my hull systematics, ef hit ain't kerrect! Ther or'nary scum skuted 'cross drink from ther camp up 'bove, then down, an' over ther ford right hyer, fer ter git ther corpses, an' perwent we-uns from gatherin' a crap o' ha'r, 'sides corralin' ther sculps of ther teamsters."

"But, dang me, ef they c'd do hit, without leavin' plain 'sign' et ther ford! Come on, boyees! I'm bettin' ther hull lay-out air hidin' in ther rocks like kiotes."

"Rattler, cheer up! An' yeou tu, curnil! I'm opinionated ter sorter think we're nigh onter ther eend o' this hyer trail; an' thet we'll git ther leetle gal 'way from 'em all hunk, 'ceptin' some consider'ble shakin' up, an' a stompede brain biz. Come! Skute's ther word, but keep shady."

The Texas Rattler groaned aloud, as did also the colonel. It was evident that neither of them had the hope that cheered Old Rocky.

As for Turtle, none could tell what was passing in his mind; but he was evidently following another "air-trail."

CHAPTER XXX.

REVENGE OR DEATH.

The state of mind, in which poor Pearl had seemed to be, when secured to the scalp-pole, was exactly what her appearance indicated.

Her recovery had been but partial, her senses being benumbed; and all the horrors that surrounded her, had, after her raising her head, been invisible, for she remained in a semi-comatose state.

But, when cut free, and clasped in the arms of the Comanche chief, speeding through the cool-shades, her fevered head was relieved, and the somewhat violent motion of the horse served to restore circulation, hitherto impeded by her bonds.

Not, however, until out upon the plain, did the poor maiden arrive at a correct realization of her position.

When she beheld, so near her own, the bideous face of Big Foot, she shrieked with horror.

The chief gave her but a glance, for his eyes were sweeping the plain; and he was evidently, as Pearl decided, a fugitive, and being pursued.

This gave the poor girl hope, which was but slight, however, after the dreaded experiences through which she had just passed. She glanced over her captor's shoulder, and the fiendish sight she beheld, was calculated to drive her into the depths of anguish and despair. It was, after all, but her father, whose yells soon betrayed his identity; his gray hair and familiar form being presently recognized by his agonized daughter.

Speeding on, in the rear of the stompede mustangs, upon the backs of which were bound the dead Comanches—himself "made up" as an Indian brave, and his horse decorated with scalps that swept the ground as he galloped—thus the poor girl beheld her n addened parent, while she was held in the arms of a most merciless and repulsive savage.

It was little wonder that Pearl shrieked aloud, and, doubtless, she would have relapsed

into her past terrible state of mind, or gone hopelessly insane, had not her gaze been mercifully directed in another quarter. Then it was, that she perceived the man she most longed to see—Rattler, the Ranger, and mounted upon the magnificent steed that she remembered so well!

In hot chase was the ranger and with him was the faithful Old Rocky, and also an Indian, evidently a friendly red-man, and pard of Rattler and the old scout. She saw, too, another; and the sight of him caused a cry of relief and joy to burst from her lips, notwithstanding her terrible position.

It was her brother, Paul, who was striving to intercept his evidently insane father.

Rattler then, had saved Paul, from the savage who had been about to torture him when she sprung from the cliff.

This was a source of great joy to Pearl.

It gave her hope that the ranger would save her as well—that he would overcome all obstacles.

Her father and brother, both of whom she had feared were slain, yet lived; and this was more than she had dared hope for.

Still something more did the maiden see.

This was the half-score of hideous braves, galloping like the wind; and she shuddered at the fearful spectacle. Could it be possible that, after all she had suffered, she was yet to fall a victim to savage cruelty?

Could it be possible that, after Rattler, Paul, and her father had so miraculously escaped death, they were yet destined to fall before the pointed shafts or knives of these fiendish red raiders?

Pearl could not bring herself to believe that this would be permitted. Still she had faith and hope. And still, on dashed Big Foot, his captive watching, with insane eagerness, the changing scenes upon the moonlit plain.

Suddenly, however, all was shut out from her view, as the Comanche chief again darted into the cool dark shades.

But a few moments after the horse of Big Foot sprung free of the thickets and into the "open"—the first Comanche camp—a fire blazing in its center, and a sickening smell pervading the air.

The chief gave a loud yell of fury.

The young braves, as he had half expected, had been all slain by the madman—the "bad medicine"!

Not a corpse, however, was within view.

Neither was there a mustang to be seen.

Lances lay upon the ground, and the sword was stained, here and there with gore.

On the outer side of the fire lay the charred remains of a human hand, three fingers of which were closed, and the fourth pointed toward the plain.

Big Foot gave a whoop of vengeful fury.

He knew that his young braves had been all killed, and cast into the flames.

And this, by the madman!

It was the crowning blow of his degradation.

He sprung to the earth, held Pearl with his left arm clutched around her trembling form and then caught up a lance from the ground.

At that moment, his ten remaining warriors dashed into the "open," and up toward their chief; their black eyes flashing fury, when they saw that the camp was deserted. Big Foot gave a signal for attention, and then pointed with his lance at the charred hand on the border of the flames.

The next instant, a peculiar whoop shot from his lips, and every brave sprung from his mustang, and gave one look at their chief.

Big Foot stood braced, his lance poised, and pointed at the side of his panting steed; the weapon being directed to strike just behind the joint of the shoulder-blade. Every other lance became instantly, poised in like manner; each brave's weapon, toward the same point on the body of his mustang.

Then followed a yell, and every lance was plunged into the quivering flesh with terrible force—the points projecting on the opposite side of the unfortunate beast!

With shrieks, that were almost human-like, the poor steeds reared upward, the blood spouting in arches on either side. Then, staggering and quivering, they fell, one after another, to the earth where they lay struggling in death.

A single whoop, and the Comanche chief, with Pearl Pemberton in his arms—the poor girl having fainted at the horrible sight, expecting that she herself would be slain the next moment—sprung into the shades, toward the river. Every brave followed, but by a different route, in order not to leave a plain trail.

As Cortez destroyed his ships, to prevent his followers from returning to Spain, so had Big Foot killed his mustangs, that his warriors might not return to their village, where naught but contempt and disgrace awaited them.

Death, before dishonor, was the decision of the Comanche chief!

Vengeance he would have, and he would do all in his power to remedy the disaster that had come upon his war-party. But, never more would he return to his tribe.

He would either die seeking revenge, or he would join the Apaches.

The warriors needed no explanation.

They knew the object of their chief, as well as if he had spoken at length in regard to his future movements. Soon they all joined him, upon the bank of the river, and plunging in, they swam to the north side of the Rio San Saba.

Then, still holding his beautiful captive with his strong left arm, his scalping knife tightly clutched in his right, and a tiger-like look in his face and eye, Big Foot darted down the river; skirting the cliffs, and going down the gulch toward the ford.

He had struck the same trail which Rattler had been following, when he discovered poor Pearl in the ford. What horrors had been theirs since then!

The chief recalled the fact that there was a cave—the same in which Black Fox had received his death wound—and on he went, along the rocky shelf, and thence up into the cavern; the bloody trail being plainly visible in the clear moonlight.

Upon reaching the dark passage, Big Foot ordered one of his braves to strike a light; and a torch being found it was ignited.

Then the cave-chamber was discovered, all forming a refuge that was easy of defense; the sight of which caused grunts of satisfaction.

The torch was thrust in the same crevice in the rocks, that had been used for that purpose by Black Fox; and the senseless form of the fair captive was laid in the same place, as on the previous evening. Now, as then, she was happily unconscious of her surroundings.

The chief, as soon as he had thus disposed of his burden, waved his knife in the air, saying:

"Big Elk stay in cave. Take care white squaw. Lose squaw, lose scalp."

Then, turning to the assembled braves, he said:

"Come! Our brothers must go to happy hunting-grounds with scalps on head. Come! *Diablo Texanos, diablo Tonkaway*, shall hear Comanche war-whoop! Our knives shall drink their blood! Our squaws shall know us no more! Shall they hoot? Shall they throw mud at Big Foot? Shall they say his braves are squaws?"

"No!" he thundered; "we will sing death-song, or our trail shall lead to Rio Pecos. Lone Wolf, the Apache, will welcome us to his village. It is good. Come! Big Foot has spoken. He is a chief in his nation."

As he ended, the speaker sprung from the cave-chamber, followed by all except Big Elk, who stretched himself across the passage where, the previous evening, the young Texan had lain, stricken by the tomahawk of Black Fox.

All was now silent in the cavern, silent as death; the form of poor Pearl, her face white as the driven snow, upturned to the glaring glare of the torch.

Big Elk knew not how soon he might be called upon to sing his death-song. Indeed, he might be stricken down by those terrible scouts, so suddenly, that the death-yell would die on his lips; consequently, he resolved to take advantage of the time left him, and have a smoke.

This he proceeded to do, at times casting a glance at the apparently dead captive maiden, and muttering, in a grumbling manner:

"Bad Medicine!"

Directly, and in haste, Big Foot and his braves returned to their camp, after crossing the ford; when, to their great relief, they found the corpse-laden mustangs standing, covered with foam, and panting laboriously. It was no longer possible to stampede them.

At once the animals were led across the ford, the dead cut loose and secreted in a thicket. Then a sufficient number of the animals were led back to the camp, to convey the braves, who had been killed in the dash of the scouts to the attempted rescue of Pearl across the river.

This was done, the corpses of the teamsters scalped and mutilated, as has been seen, and the trophies on the pole taken down. In a few minutes, the Comanche camp was deserted; the demolished wagons and goods, however, remaining, as well as the corpses of the ill-starred teamsters, Bud and Jim.

Another cave, near the ford, was discovered; and, before our friends arrived at the big tree, and found that the red raiders had again been in the camp, the slain, under the direction of Big Foot, had all been laid in the cavern.

The mustangs had then been started up the gulch, toward the northern plain, the poor animals walking slowly, some staggering, in their fatigue after the terrible run, when they had been stampeded by the mad ranchero.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"ANYWHERE, OUT OF THE WORLD!"

THEIR dead having been disposed of, the mouth of the cave in which the corpses had been placed being walled up with loose rocks to prevent wild beasts from gaining entrance, Big Foot and his braves proceeded up the cliff-side, amid boulders and clumps of cacti, on their return to the cavern which they had chosen for their retreat in case of being hard pressed and in which to rest and partake of food.

One of the mustangs had been led into a side branch of the gulch and there killed, and the hams brought with them to serve as food.

Thus far they had observed no signs of their enemies, and they began to believe they had deceived them in regard to the direction they had taken.

The scouts would without doubt, suppose that the Comanches had gone toward the west, with the intention of returning to their villages; having killed the mustangs in order not to leave a plain trail for some distance; and besides, other animals could be easily captured, upon which they could continue their journey over the vast plains.

Thus reasoned the Comanche chief, and he determined that, although he had but few braves, he would secure the horses that he had started toward the north plain, after the animals had recruited, and then return to his village.

Now that he had the scalps of the teamsters to prove that he had been in desperate action, he believed that his defeat would be looked upon by the civil chiefs with leniency. With these thoughts in his mind, Big Foot, followed by his braves, stalked along the rocky shelf and into the cavern.

The torch cast its fiery rays through the entrance to the cave-chamber, and upon the form of Big Elk, who was now in a death-like slumber.

With a "Waugh!" of anger and contempt, the chief sprung over the sleeping warrior.

He then gazed around the cavern.

Not a living object was visible!

Coming from the outer light, his eyes might be dimmed.

Thus thought Big Foot, and he closed his lids for a moment, and then gazed upon the spot where the white squaw had been placed.

Only the bare rock met his view.

Pearl Pemberton was gone!

With a snarl of intense rage, he sprung backward, clutched Big Elk by the hair, and jerked the warrior to his feet.

Without an instant's hesitation, the chief thrust the brave before him, waving his hand for his warriors to follow. Down the rough rocks to the shelf, the disgraced brave was forced; his stoical face showing no emotion, but from his lips sounded the weird notes of his death-song.

Straight along the shelf, to the same point from which Rattler had made his wild leap to Pearl's rescue, Big Foot forced Big Elk. Reaching the verge of the height, he snatched the scalping-knife from Big Elk's belt, and thrust it into the owner's hand, saying:

"Big Elk is a squaw. The spirits of his fathers whisper in his ears. He must go where his sleep will be long. Big Foot has spoken."

For a few moments the death-chant sounded monotonously over the chasm, floating up and down the San Saba. Then the face of Big Elk was turned upward, the terrible blade was elevated at arm's length, and the next instant was buried in the warrior's breast, by his own hand!

The death-yell shot out, the strong form of Big Elk swayed for a moment, and then down went the corpse beneath the surface of the water.

At that very instant, the taunting war-cry of Turtle, the Tonkaway, came up from the shades.

With a yell of fury, the chief sprung to the spot so recently occupied by the doomed brave.

One sweeping glance showed him the form of Paul Pemberton, outstretched on the sword, in the little "open," on the margin of the opposite side of the river.

A cry of exultation burst from his lips.

He felt quickly for his bow and arrows, but then remembered that he had hurled the weapons aside in the cave.

Signaling one of his braves, he pointed out the sleeping youth. On the instant, how was strung, and an arrow fitted. The feathered end of the shaft kissed the painted cheek of the warrior. His fingers were about to loosen, to send the arrow on its errand of death, when loud rung the report of a revolver.

The arms of the brave came together spasmodically, the bow and arrow fell from his nerveless grasp; and, with a horrible death-yell, he also shot down the steep, to join Big Elk on the "long dark trail."

A whoop of war burst from Big Foot, followed instantly by another loud report; and one more brave fell upon the cliff-shelf, shot in the back.

It was evident that their terrible enemies must be near the cave.

One yell, in signal, and Big Foot dashed back into the cavern, followed by his terrified braves.

All now seemed to be doomed!

"Cuss my cats, an' dang my dorgs, ef thar ain't two more o' ther bellyuns wiped out! Tonk war on t'other side ther drink. Wonder what thet greasy son o' Satan war goin' ter shoot et? C'u'dn't ha' bin ther Tonk, fer he w'u'dn't ha' showed hisself. Dang ef we hain't bin thinnin' 'em out purty some consider'ble, an' we've gut 'em kerral'd!"

"All what worritates me air es 'gards ther leetle gal. She hain't done no screechin' o' late, an' I opines she's off inter another o' her spells. Ef she air, hit air lucky, fer hellishness hew

commenced ag'in. I thought we'd run 'em ter thar hole, but I didn't s'pose we'd do hit quite so speedy.

"They can't git by this ole raw-hide ripper, without gittin' daylight let through 'em; an' though I'm alone, I reckon some on ther boyees 'll j'ine me afore soon."

Thus soliloquized Old Rocky, who had fired the last shot; and who, from the shelter of a boulder, commanded the shelf, cutting off all retreat from the cave, except by leaping into the San Saba.

No sooner had Turtle shot the Comanche who was about to send an arrow into the sleeping Paul, the Tonkaway being some distance above, than the war-spirit of his people came to the front, and he rushed at full speed toward the ford.

Not for a moment did he dream that Paul for whom he had been looking, was the intended target of the Comanche; and the youth slept on, regardless of the shots and yells. As will be seen, our friends had scattered; all seeking the hiding-place of the Comanches, and all to meet at the point of the first alarm.

Rattler, in less than five minutes after Old Rocky's revolver "spoke," rushed to the side of the old scout; and, when the latter explained what had occurred, the young ranger was at once struck with the fact as detailed, of the Comanche's being about to shoot downward from the cliff, at the time Turtle's bullet pierced his breast.

It was also recalled to Rattler, that Pearl had once escaped from the same cave in which she now was, and had sprung into the river.

Had the poor girl again taken to the dark passage, found her way to the opening over the waters, and was it she at whom the savages had been aiming? It would seem, if this had been the case, that the Tonkaway had discovered the maiden.

Nothing must be neglected, however, in connection with the attempt to rescue Pearl; and the ranger resolved that he would make his way to the verge of the cliff from which the two Indians had just fallen, and from which he himself had jumped to the rescue of Pearl, on the previous evening.

Explaining hastily to Old Rocky, whose expostulations against such an attempt were not listened to, Rattler crawled along, upon hands and knees; keeping close to the side of the cliff, and at length succeeding in passing the cave entrance without being observed.

Soon he was on the verge of the steep, and gazing downward; while the old scout, with revolvers presented, stood ready to rush to his defense if necessary, although he by no means wished to give up his vantage ground.

The amazement of Rattler may be imagined when he beheld, in the self-same spot on the opposite bank, Paul outstretched in the same position as when a captive to the Comanche.

The young ranger was dumfounded; but a moment's reflection convinced him that the youth had strayed thither in his fatigue, and had fallen asleep. But hardly had he arrived at this conclusion when the very blood in his veins was chilled by a heart-rending shriek, exactly as intoned on the previous evening, under such similar circumstances.

Bounding at once to his feet, thinking not of the Comanches, again Rattler saw his darling Pearl plunge down into the waters of the San Sabal. Again the young man braced himself, and made that awful jump, far down the dizzy height, without a moment's hesitation, just as a volley of arrows cut the air where he had last stood!

With a far-sounding plunge the ranger sunk beneath the surface; then arose, and swam madly after the floating body of his darling.

Paul, awakened by the shriek and the repetition of Rattler's terrific leap, stood appalled upon the bank, and as if frozen to the spot.

Soon the young ranger clutched the loved form of the suffering maiden in his grasp, swam to the shore, and was joined by Paul and Colonel Pemberton, the latter having been drawn thither by the shriek of his daughter.

Giving Pearl up at once to her father and brother, Rattler, now that she was safe, became himself again. He was furious for revenge. He recalled the fact that Old Rocky was alone on the shelf, but he felt sure that Turtle would now join the old scout.

An instant's reflection decided him upon a new course of action. Pearl, he knew, had escaped from the cave-chamber, as before. The Comanches could not be aware of the narrow outlet which led from the cavern. He would now enter by that direction, and thus gain an advantage by surprising them.

He quickly fired off his pistols, the dull report proving that the powder had been somewhat saturated, and reloaded as he ran. A lariat was around his waist, and he picked up another as he dashed through the thicket.

Soon he reached a point directly over the mouth of the shaft, from which Pearl had twice leaped. Fastening the end of a lariat to a dwarf cedar-stump, and attaching the two together, the ranger cast the long rope over the cliff-side.

Without a moment's hesitancy, he let himself

over the verge of the cliff, and down the rope he went, gauging his descent by placing his feet against the cliff side.

In two minutes he was standing at the opening from which Pearl had leaped.

Jerking a revolver, and feeling along the damp, rough walls, Rattler groped his way into the bowels of the bluff.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRIUMPH OF THE TONKAWAY.

OLD ROCKY had been dumfounded, at seeing Rattler spring from the high cliff into the river; but he had heard the shriek of Pearl, and was satisfied that the maiden's safety depended upon the ranger—that it was an affair of life and death.

"Dog my cats, ef things doesn't continner ter be permiscu's-like! Yer can't count, head er tail, how anythin' air goin' ter pan out, from one minute ter ther nex'. But, howsomever, I opine I has deadwood onder Big Foot's lay-out; an' I'm goin' ter keep ther bilge, ef hit makes a suttin'-ben outen me."

"Hit's lonesome, fer ter squat hyer, when thar's bellishness croppin' out t'other side ther rocks. I w'u'dn't be sot back much, ef I know'd Rattler hed gut leetle Pearl O. K.; an' I opine he w'u'dn't ba' lunged offen ther jump-off place, riskin' his life, without he see'd ther leetle gal in a bad box."

"Wonder ef ther curnil hev gun lunified ag'in? Dang ef hit hain't bin bilyus enough ter sot a squar' head topsy-turvy! I've hed bugs on ther biz buzz in my years, ever since we struck ther San Saba. Wish't ther Tonk 'u'd turn up!"

"Turtle is here," said the wished for man; and the Tonkaway guided, noiselessly, to the side of the old scout.

"Hear my white brother shoot, but no sound war-cry. Where Comanches? Ugh! Want scalp. War-whoop on lips."

"I plug'd a red bellyun jist arter yeou did, Tonk. Thar he lays onder ther shelf; ef ye'r hankerin' fer ha'r, go an' skin his head!"

"Dang'd ef yer didn't gi'n me a s'art, though! I war expectin' yer, but neverstandin' I kin nigh swallerin' a hefty chaw o' nigger-head."

"Whar's ther rest o' our outfit? But, dang my dorga, I fergut! Rattler le'p't from ther cliff over thar, down inter ther drink. Did yer hear ther leetle gal screech?"

"Turtle hear. Think sound like death-yell. White Face die, Turtle heart sad."

"She's grit ter ther backbone, er she'd wilted long ergo, Tonk. I reckon we'll shove through O. K., 'sides salerwatin' ther hull hellish outfit. Ther hull cantankerous crowd ain't w'oth one leetle groan from purty Pearl. But, look out fer yerself, Tonk; I'll keep ther hole kivered with my shooters."

This last was said, as Turtle crawled over the same course, along by the wall of the gorge, upon the rocky shelf, toward the dead Comanche.

Soon he reached the corpse, and dexterously removed the scalp. He then straightened erect, and sent out the war-cry of his tribe, in taunting exultation. As the sound left his lips, Turtle sunk quickly to the earth; at the same time firing his revolver.

He had caught the glint of the black eyes of the Comanche braves, at the mouth of the cave.

A volley of arrows cut the air, where, an instant previous, his proud form had stood; one feathered shaft grazing his eagle-plumes, as it was.

A yell of agony, mingled with the war-cry of the Comanches; and three shots, fired in quick succession by Old Rocky, drove the Indians back into the cave.

An instant after, both the Tonkaway and the old scout were amazed by a rattling fusillade of revolver-shots, which sounded from the cavern; also death-yells, and whoops of war.

For a moment only did they stand, rooted to the spot; then, knowing well that the Rattler must have gained an entrance to the cave by some way unknown to the Comanches, and that he was battling for life alone, both rushed madly up the rocky way into the cave.

Then, guided by the light of the torch, they sprung into the cave-chamber, where a fearful sight met their view.

In one corner of the cavern stood Rattler, the Ranger, four braves lying dead before him; and he, knife in hand, his revolver having been thrown aside, empty, now battling with two braves. Big Foot, knife in hand, but unable to reach the ranger, stood glaring, half-bent, ready to spring upon him should his warriors fail to slay the hated Texan.

Loud rung the war-whoop of Turtle, and this served as a signal to change the whole scene.

The Comanche chief sprung, panther-like, across the cave-chamber; and then darted out the entrance, afraid to meet the dauntless Tonkaway, who stood, knife in hand, ready for combat, and whose whoop of war had been a challenge to the chief, as the latter well knew.

At the instant the war-whoop was given, the knife of the Texas Rattler was buried to the buckhorn in the breast of one of his red adversaries, while Old Rocky bounded with a yell upon the other, who was so startled and ap-

palled at the wholesale death and the unexpected appearance of fresh foes—to say nothing of the flight of his chief—that he offered but little resistance.

Soon he lay with his gore-stained fellow-braves, his last war-cry having sounded, the death-yell dying upon his lips.

"Shake, Rattler! Cuss my cats an' dorga, an' hull systematics, ef we-'uns hev'n't swep'ther board clean! All 'ceptin' Big Huff, thet is; an' I reckon ther Tonk'll take keer o' him."

"How in thunderation did yer git inter this hole?"

The young ranger, panting with exertion, pointed to the cavity, saying:

"The same way by which poor Pearl twice made her escape."

"An' she's bunk, then? I heerd her squeal, an' see'd yer le'p over inter ther drink."

"Yes, thank Heaven!" returned the young man, "she's safe with her father and brother."

Upon the face of the ranger there was an expression of the deepest joy and gratitude, as he raised his clasped hands, all blood-stained, while he spoke.

Old Rocky threw his sombrero to one side, squirting tobacco-juice copiously and spitefully upon the pile of dead Comanches as a preliminary. He then said, but it sounded rather grudgingly and growlingly:

"Amen!"

After this, he muttered to himself:

"I reckon ther Father of us all sorter helped things 'long, but we-'uns hed ter do ther heft o' ther shoot an' cut—dod-gast my knee-pans ef we didn't!"

"Howsomever, He's pulled us through—come ter think—by making ther bellishness strike back ter ther stumjacks o' ther cantankerous cusses; an' they'd puked up thar toe-nails, I reckon, ef we'd gi'n 'em time ter gag a few."

Then thinking of the Tonkaway they both rushed from the cave, to witness a most imposing sight as they reached the boulder—a sight that was visible not only to Old Rocky and Rattler, but also to Colonel Pemberton, Paul and Pearl, who were on the opposite side of the river.

It was the two chiefs, the Tonkaway and the Comanche—Turtle and Big Foot—both standing some five paces apart upon the very highest portion of the cliff, each with knife in hand, each half-bent, ready to spring upon the other!

"Jumpin' Jerusalem!" exclaimed the old scout; "thet's jist awful! Ef ther cuss kills Turtle I'll skin him alive, ef I kin ketch him!"

"It is, indeed, terrible! Big Foot is much stronger, much more powerful, than the Tonkaway."

This was the reply of the Rattler.

The observers stood motionless.

The suspense was not of long duration.

Each bronzed form sprung forward at the same instant.

Knives flashed and clicked, sparks of fire flying from the steel, upon which the moonlight played.

The movements of their sinewy arms were lightning-like.

The conflict was long, with no seeming advantage on either side. Then both became locked in an embrace, that, it was evident, must end in death to one or both.

Writhing, serpent-like, they rolled over and over, on the small level space, on the summit of the cliff.

The sight was now more terrible than before. At any moment both might roll off the dizzy height, into the dark-flowing San Saba.

The spectators stared in enthralled terror.

Then they saw one arm shoot upward, a flash of steel, and then downward.

With a horrible cry, out rung the death-yell.

It was the last cry of the Comanche!

Turtle was conqueror, but both were prostrate.

This, however, did not long remain so.

The well known form of the Tonkaway, his eagle-feathers flaunting unbroken, notwithstanding the struggle, arose to an erect posture. Then his knife was seen to circle about the head of his victim. Next, by a herculean effort, Turtle clutched the belt and leggins of his foe, and raised the corpse bodily over his head, at arm's length!

For a moment this imposing tableau was clearly outlined in the moonlight. Then the red hero cast his victim afar out, over the cliff; the corpse of Big Foot, the merciless Comanche chief, the terror of the border, shooting through space, and plunging into the waters of the sullen river below.

Then with knife in one hand and the gory scalp of his hated foe in the other, the Tonkaway chief stood proudly, his eagle-feathers flaunting, while from his lips shot the war-cry of his tribe, in victorious exultation.

Yells of joy, relief and gratulation rung from the throats of his white parads. Even poor Pearl uttered a glad cry of thankfulness that the terrible chief was dead, and the brave and noble Tonkaway was safe!

Yet while all thus gazed at their red friend, the scalp and knife-filled hands fell to the side of the victorious Turtle, his eagle-plumed head sunk upon his breast, he staggered and dropped

upon his knees, and from thence flat upon the rocky summit of the cliff!

With exclamations of anguish and concern, all witnessed this. The Rattler and Old Rocky tore up the cliff to the side of their red pard. Examining his body with the greatest anxiety, they soon discovered that he had received several severe stabs, and that he lay in a perfect pool of his own blood.

Carefully they bore him down to the river-bank, and there bathed his wounds. Thence, over the stream they bore him, where every possible assistance was rendered him, the colonel having rescued the medicine-chest from among the debris of the wagons.

In a little time, Turtle, who had lost a large amount of blood, sprung to his feet, feeling ashamed of his weakness, but his tottering footsteps bore testimony to the fortitude he had exercised in the effort to keep erect, and scorn the agony of his wounds.

An hour after these last stirring and tragic events, Colonel Pemberton, his son and daughter, were sleeping beneath the immense tree that had served as a covert and lookout.

There, for the present, we leave them, guarded by three as brave and trusty sentinels as ever kept a watch—Turtle, the Tonkaway, Old Rocky, the Scout, and Raybold, the Rattling Ranger!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE OLD STORY, EVER NEW.

WE have thus, after detailing the horrors experienced by the leading characters in our story, and their providential escape from terrible deaths, little more to relate in connection with them.

Old Rocky, on the morning following the annihilation of Big Foot's war-party, set out for Fort Mason, to engage men to come and repair the wagons, and also to take the place of the slain teamsters.

Turtle and Paul not only succeeded in recovering the mules and extra stock belonging to the colonel, but drove into the timber-cove all the mustangs of the Comanche war-party, from both the north and south plains. These were sold to great advantage, later on, to the rancheros on the Rio Llano.

Colonel Pemberton and his daughter remained at the famous tree near the cove, happy in each other's company, when Rattler was not with them; the young ranger going out for the choicest of game and fish, for his friends to enjoy, Turtle and Paul coming in for their share.

In due course of time the wagons were all repaired, except that in which the powder had been stored and exploded.

But little of the freight, of any kind, was found to have been injured; and the reader may rest assured that it required no great urging or persuasion to induce Colonel Pemberton to start on the back-trail, toward the Llano river, which was, at some points, settled by rancheros.

A section of land was there taken up, or located, a substantial log-dwelling erected, and Rattler prevailed upon Old Rocky to go to San Antonio with him, to secure necessary ammunition and breed-cattle, he having concluded to enter into partnership with the colonel, though neither of them intended to enter largely into the business until more settled times.

Colonel Pemberton, after the terrible experience through which he had passed, was even suspicious of danger on the Rio Llano, and guarded against it by leaving the bulk of his capital on deposit in a bank at San Antonio.

Much to the surprise and pleasure of the young ranger, he received a letter, while in the Alamo City, from his father in Galveston. The latter had just learned that the famous ranger, of whom he had heard so much, was none other than his long-absent son—Reginald Raybold—and for whom he had sought for a long time without success.

Rattler was greatly rejoiced at this, as it removed a heavy load from his mind; a load that had been the means of banishing him from his home and friends, causing him to adopt the life of a ranger and scout.

The young Texan's history, in brief, was this:

He had been a trusted clerk in a large wholesale mercantile house, in the Island City; and, while in that position, forgeries were laid at his door, which had been committed by a fellow-clerk. The latter had used every effort to divert suspicion from himself to Reginald, and with such success that our hero, upon being informed that a warrant had been issued for his arrest, knowing that, although innocent, his enemy had cunningly manufactured evidence, created suspicion which would most certainly convict him, left Galveston and hastened to the border.

There, in a short time, he became a noted ranger and scout, but a limited few, who were confident of his innocence, knowing who he really was. These were Old Rocky and some of his fellow-rangers.

But the letter, which now awaited him in San Antonio, informed Rattler that the perfidious clerk had, since then, been convicted of

forgery, and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment; his conscience, later on, forcing him to write Reginald's father, and his recent employers, that he had also forged the notes which had been the cause of so much trouble, and on account of which an innocent young man was then an exile from his home and friends.

They now implored Reginald Raybold to return, his father promising him that, if he preferred Western Texas, an amount of money would be given him to enable him to engage in business on such a scale as he might desire, or as was agreeable to his station in life, and the education he had received.

The young man immediately responded to his father's epistle, giving a brief account of his life on the plains, and dwelling more particularly upon the events we have recorded.

He informed his father that he was about to become a Benedict, and promised to extend his wedding-tour as far as his old home. He expressed his thanks for the kind offer that had been made him, and accepted the proffered capital for a start in life.

This epistle the Texas Rattler read to Old Rocky before mailing it.

"Cuss my cats an' dang my dorgs, ef I didn't allers think you'd come out all O. K. in ther end!" said the old scout, giving his pard a hearty shake.

"A fu'st-cut human may sometimes git bagged, but he'll strike good hard dirt arter awhile, an' hit'll l'arn him ter be dead sure he's right afore he goes ahead, es Dave Crockett used ter spit out.

"I'm ormighty chuck-full o' glad, old boyee, though hit'll take yer away some considerable from this yer ole rawhide ripper."

The old scout chewed vigorously to hide his emotion.

In twenty-four hours more, both were on the trail back to the Rio Llano, where they soon arrived; and it was a happy moment when Rattler passed his father's letter, to be read by Pearl to the colonel.

Some three months afterward there was a grand wedding at Pemberton Ranch, on the Rio Llano; a crowd of rangers, scouts and rancheros, not to speak of Turtle and a delegation of his braves, being present—old Placador, the head chief of the Tonkaways, being one of the number.

The affair was a most enjoyable one for all who participated; an extensive barbecue being prepared for the guests, a whole ox being roasted for the occasion, to say nothing of deer, antelope, wild turkeys, and the choicest fish from the river.

Paul was, perhaps, with the exception of the parties most interested, the happiest and jolliest one there; he, as well as many cowboys and rangers, giving exhibitions of horsemanship and lassoing before the assemblage, who sat beneath the grand old towering and moss-draped trees of the Llano bottom.

The bridegroom and bride proceeded to Galveston, according to promise, where they were warmly welcomed by the Raybold family; many manifestations of pleasure, and hearty congratulations coming from old friends.

Reginald was, to his relatives, like one coming from the dead. They were proud of the noble, brave, and new-found kinsman, whose border reputation had long been known to them; never dreaming that Rattler, the Ranger, was Reginald Raybold.

As may be supposed, the Pearl of the Prairie was the center of attraction; her beauty and amiability winning friends wherever she went.

They remained for some time in the Island city, and before returning to their border home, exacted a promise from Reginald's father and other relatives that they would make them a visit!

The money, which the young ranger received from his father, enabled him, upon his return to the Rio Llano, to locate and stock a ranch, as well as build a beautiful home for his bride, whose life was thenceforth one pleasant summer's dream. But, for all that, there would, at times, fall over them both the shadows of those most fearful experiences on the Rio San Saba; which was little to be wondered at, as all will admit.

Old Rocky and Turtle were frequent visitors at Raybold Ranch, and were there made as much at home as were the owners themselves. Paul often accompanied his old friends on hunting expeditions, but never, until some years after, ventured near the San Saba.

Colonel Pemberton did not entirely recover his mental and physical strength for many a long month; but the others, being younger, and from having the wishes of their hearts gratified, banished as far as was possible all thoughts and words that were calculated to remind them of the terrible scenes through which they had passed. These had, however, taught them to appreciate each other, and the peace and security which they enjoyed in their new home.

Indeed, no happier couple was there, in the Lone Star State, than Pearl Raybold, nee Pemberton, and her handsome and gallant husband, Reginald Raybold, so long known as the RATTling Ranger.

THE END.

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